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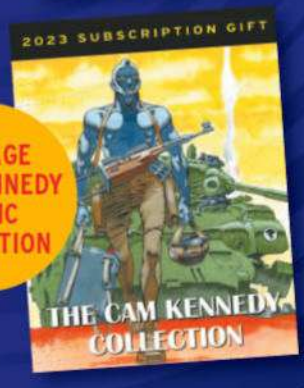

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First Contact

Hailing Frequencies Open!

"The Star Beast": 2023's biggest drama launch.

WILD BLUE PONDER

Michela M, email I hate spoilers so I usually read your magazine very slowly (I'm a few issues behind). I knew that David Tennant was coming back along with Catherine Tate, but I was happily surprised to see Yasmin Finney as Donna's daughter. I loved her in *Heartstopper*, she's brilliant and was perfect in the first new special.

"Wild Blue Yonder" was brilliant and kind of terrifying and I think it could fit perfectly in the old Tennant/Smith eras. It echoes a number of elements from back then but in its own way – a worthy update. I loved it, how it looked, how it all eventually clicked... brilliant. What is lacking at the end of it is, of course, the Doctor going back to Isaac Newton to sort out this misunderstanding about the "mavity", but in due time, I hope...

SFX: ***Who can forget Sandra Bullock and George Clooney in 2013's Mavity... Wait, what?***

FANGS BUT NO FANGS

Robert MacDonald, email I recently came across the adaptation of *Interview With The Vampire/The Vampire Chronicles* on iPlayer. Having read a piece by yourselves on its production I was intrigued enough to box-set the series.

Why do those adapting work for the screen, either big or small, feel the need to cherry-pick names and some plot points and create something that bears little resemblance to the original IP? Why not commission original work?

I loved the cinematography, the production design, costume, effects and cast, but came away with a nasty taste in my mouth, believing Ms Rice would be turning in her grave if she saw what has become of her beloved Lestat, Louis and Claudia.

SFX: ***Always assuming Ms Rice is actually in that grave, of course...***

The rate the *Avatar* movies are going we'll be able to visit Pandora for real before they're done!
David Yates

Wasn't Liz Shaw technically the first scientific advisor? She was on board (just) before Mr Pertwee joined UNIT...
@jamesls12

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SFX

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"I'm thinking Gaga's meat suit, but candy"

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Star Trek: Prodigy* has a new home! It's now on Netflix, with season two – thankfully – coming later in 2024.

→ What's more festive than a pop song about eating babies?

RANTS

→ Why did people assume that because it was an anniversary – which happens every year – that the *Doctor Who* specials had to be a tsunami of pointless cameos? We had that in 2022!

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Bleep the Meep! bit.ly/bleepmeep

→ Public service announcement: all of *Rentaghost* is now on ITVX Premium, and there's a one-week free trial. Week off work, binge eight episodes a day, sorted.

→ Turns out Peter Strickland is an old-school *Doctor Who* fan, and would *love* to work on the series. Just mentioning this in case any showrunners are reading.

→ If you missed it, I recommend Radcliffe & Maconie's *The Wicker Man* at 50 special. Hopefully you've read this before January and it's still on BBC Sounds...

RANTS

→ All I want from *Doctor Who* animations is a rough approximation of what the story looked like when it first aired. Can we go back to doing that, please?

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Brian Blessed's Lord Summerisle in the audio adaptation of *The Wicker Man*. What a voice!

→ Love the vertigo-inducing titles for new *Who*!

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RANTS

→ In case you hadn't heard, Sony was recently forced to remove all Discovery videos – hundreds of hours – from its PlayStation service, because of licensing changes. That included shows that people had *bought*, not simply rented or streamed. (Sorry, no refunds.) It's a helpful reminder that this can happen with just about any streaming service at any time. Support physical media!

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ Wonderful to see Pat Mills and Dave Gibbons being fanboyed by David Tennant for their contributions to *Doctor Who*. Quite right too!

→ And check out Pat's new book *Pageturners*, full of hard-won pro tips for aspiring writers, an intriguing pinch of mysticism and some great insights into his *Who* work.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Poor Things* is the best and most original take on *Frankenstein* in a long time, by far. Surreal, funny, and Emma Stone's best work.

→ Finally, an announcement about *Arcane* returning with season two in 2024! Now go watch the show you've been meaning to get to, because you won't be disappointed.

Captain's Log

You'll probably be reading this after Christmas and will have seen the Doctor meet Ruby Sunday by now. But for us it's timey-wimey... Has David Tennant left yet? Who's the Doctor now? We don't even know what day it is – as I write this, November is barely over!

But that's why we sat down with Ncuti Gatwa and Millie Gibson *before* we'd seen "The Church On Ruby Road" but we're running their interview *after* it's been on screen. There's just been too much *Doctor Who* in the past few issues! Who'd have thought we'd ever say that!

This year has been absolutely incredible as a fan editing the world's number one sci-fi magazine – from meeting the Meep and Jimbo, trying on bits of a Wrarth costume, watching the Seventh Doctor and Ace reunite in the studio and running around the new TARDIS set, to crying laughing when speaking with Millie and Ncuti, it's been surreal. And it's only the beginning!

Anyway, stay tuned faithful reader as there's lots more *Who* to come, along with lots and lots and *lots* of incredible new and returning series, blockbuster movies and so much more. Honestly, despite the December (is it December now?) brain fog I can genuinely say how excited I am about the things we have coming up for you in 2024. So if you haven't subscribed, now's the time to get an absolute bargain and never miss an issue! As ever, we appreciate your support, and thank you all for being with us as we head into our 29th year in print.

Take care, see you in four weeks!

Darren x

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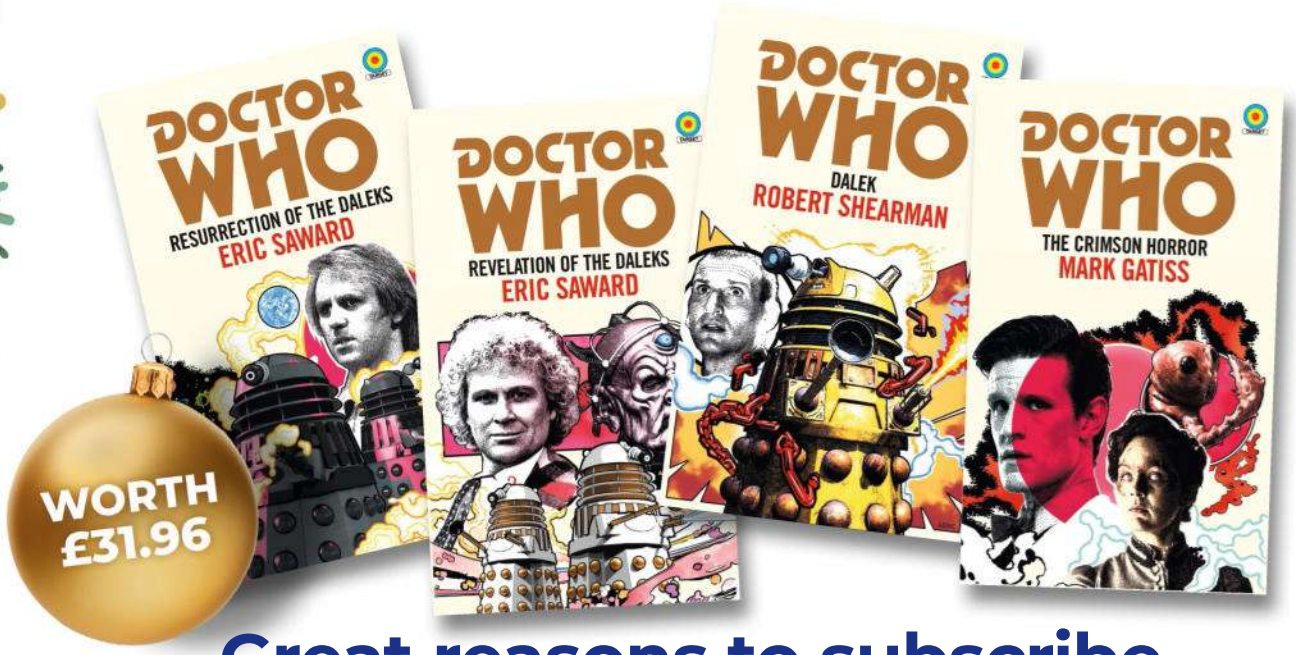

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Red Alert

JANUARY 2024

NEWS //// INTERVIEWS //// INSIGHT //// SNARKS!

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SENT FROM THE GODS

Why this Percy Jackson is the real deal

Highlights

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NIGHT SWIM
Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water – now your swimming pool is haunted!

10
HELLBLAZER
John Constantine is back, back, BACK, but probably not in the way you were expecting...

16
POWER PACK
And they would've got away with it if it wasn't for those pesky kids! Happy 40th, Power Packers.

"Erm... has anyone seen the dog lately?"

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

What Lurks Beneath

Why **Night Swim** is not just an "evil swimming pool movie" WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

JAMES WAN WAS SWIMMING around his pool late one night when he thought he saw someone watching him. A shiver ran up his spine. The malignant mind behind the *Saw*, *Conjuring* and *Insidious* franchises was scared. Yet he knew where he had seen this scene before: in a short film. "When you scare James Wan, there couldn't be a higher compliment," Bryce McGuire, the director of *Night Swim*, tells Red Alert.

Nine years on, his terrifying viral short has been expanded into a feature-length film, produced by Wan and horror super-producer Jason Blum. "It's been a long and somewhat winding road," McGuire says of *Night Swim*'s journey to the big screen. The initial problem was that the filmmaker – along with the short's co-creator Rod Blackhurst – couldn't come up with a compelling reason why *Night Swim* would make a good feature. After all, the basic premise is essentially "spooky swimming pool movie" – which, the duo thought, sounded like a one-scare wonder. However, after being approached countless times to expand on their story, they knew there must be something brooding under the water. "A lot of people shared our irrational fear of the pool, and we were like, 'Thank god, we're not alone,'" McGuire says. "Even as adults, there's something ominous and evocative about that location."

Gavin Warren as Elliot Waller glimpses something...

Ray Waller (Wyatt Russell) and his family.

Two years later, McGuire had a eureka moment. "I had an idea that I felt was a big enough mystery, a big enough mythology, that it developed into a real story that needed to be told over an hour and a half," he says. What, exactly, was that ghastly idea? Despite *SFX*'s best attempts to prise it out of him, McGuire won't open up.

"There's a plot twist that I think is better experienced," he explains. "But I will say that I knew I wanted the film to be about what the pool represents, certainly here in America. It's a little slice of the American dream."

Night Swim centres on a dysfunctional family that moves from one side of America to another after its patriarch, a baseball player played by *Overlord*'s Wyatt Russell, gets ill and has to quit the sport. The new household gives them a second chance at stability, the pool becoming a unifying presence and offering them water therapy. As McGuire puts it, the pool felt like a prayer being answered.

"That's what made it scary to me," he says. "What's the cost of this dream? The movie makes you root for that dream until your defences are down. *You* want that pool, too. It's alluring. But that's the Trojan horse. That's when your defences are down. That's what makes the pool most dangerous and deadly as its true colours are shown."

> **"I knew I wanted the film to be about what the pool represents, here in America"**

Fun, McGuire stresses, helps make *Night Swim* work as a feature. "There's a real thematic conversation happening here, but it's also a haunted pool movie," he says. "It should be fun, right? There's a sense of levity and enjoyment in moments. It allows the audience to relax, like, 'Okay, we get it, it's an evil pool.'"

McGuire aimed to make the pool its own character. "I wanted the pool to have its own sense of agency and sense that it's hiding a bigger mystery," he says. "In a haunted house movie, the house can turn on you. The doors can shut in your face and lock you in.

"We enjoy the house because it's imbued with its own powers and personality. Our pool has that quality to it. All the locations that you know – reaching into the drain flap or getting your hair caught in the filter – there's always a question of, 'What the fuck is going on beneath the surface?' Beyond that, there are characters, entities, that are part of this mythology."

Do not, however, expect definitive explanations for all the evils swimming around, as McGuire likens *Night Swim* to *The Shining* and how the origins of evil are not precisely explained in Kubrick's film.

"There's enough to be satisfied and provoke your imagination, but also there's more you want to learn," he says. "There are deeper layers beneath the iceberg. The unknown is sometimes the scariest thing."

Does that imply there's the potential for a *Night Swim* franchise? "I don't want to jinx anything," McGuire says, "but there are much deeper waters to explore.

"There's a little Easter egg in one of the early scenes that, to me, points a path to where I'd like to go. It would be fun to explore and expand the mythology."

So if *Night Swim* makes a big enough splash at the box office, prepare for more horrors from beneath.

Night Swim is in cinemas from 5 January.

SCI-FACT! Director Bryce McGuire describes *Night Swim* as "an evil *Cocoon*", referring to Ron Howard's 1985 science fiction movie.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

American Horror Story

Si Spurrier and Aaron Campbell are taking John Constantine on the road as they return to **Hellblazer** WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

THREE YEARS AFTER THEIR RUN on *Hellblazer* came to an end, Si Spurrier and Aaron Campbell are returning to the mage with *John Constantine, Hellblazer: Dead In America*, which sees an ailing John Constantine crossing the Atlantic as he flees murder charges in his native Britain.

"It's certainly where we always intended to take him, which was John in the US on the run from the law and slowly realising that his body is essentially dead so he has to do something about that," explains Spurrier.

"It's all still exactly the same but with some additional, quite meaty incentivisation, which came about because we sat down and thought about a lot of the greatest hits, the things that really matter if you're interested in the life and times of John Constantine."

Guest-starring both Swamp Thing and the Dream King himself, the eight-parter not only harks back to Constantine's debut in 1985's *Swamp Thing* 37, but also his role in 1989's *Sandman* issue three. "It occurred to me while I was plotting all this out that there were some quite significant gaps in John's backstory, which, by miraculous convenience, allowed us to tell the same story we wanted to tell – but with a whole lot of added stakes, and the legitimate appearance of these characters that people are interested in," continues Spurrier.

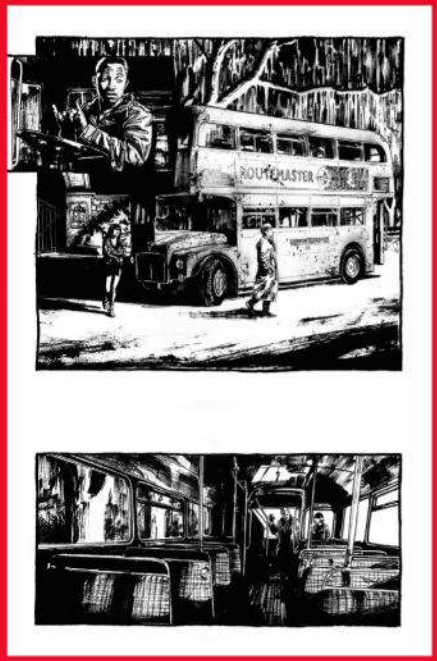
"Dream is sort of the initiator of this entire arc and Swamp Thing plays a massive role, while we'll also bump into various other characters – that we're not going to spoil – as both protagonists and antagonists."

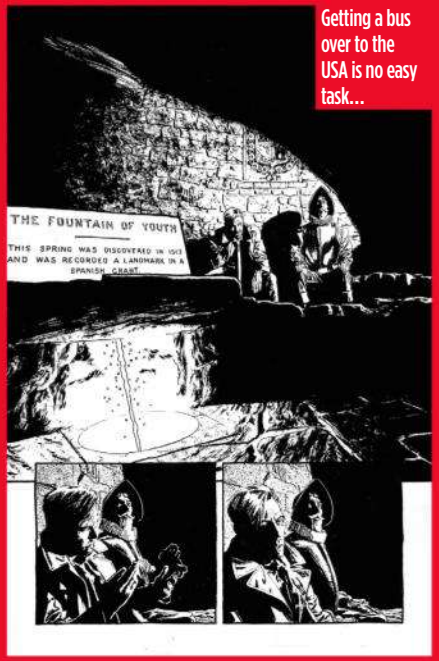
The first issue alludes to how, after being released from Roderick Burgess's prison in *Sandman* issue one, Morpheus sets out to track down his missing items of power. These include the bag of sand that allows him to manipulate dreams, which had fallen into Constantine's hands; after he failed to open it, it passed onto his ex-girlfriend, who became addicted to its narcotic properties.

"The thing that didn't make sense to me is that if she was able to pull the strings apart in order to utilise it as a drug, then why couldn't John – despite being a well-regarded occultist who really should have been able to do that?" says Spurrier. "The answer is, he did.

"He lied. He told a big, fat fib to Dream, who not being up to full speed at the time was totally hoodwinked by it. The fact that John at some point in the past did, in fact, have access to small quantities of this incredible magical resource speaks to a lot of the stuff that he was doing in *Swamp Thing*, and it fits in with what happens to him and his companions in this arc that we're now telling."

Taking to the road in a red Routemaster bus, Constantine is accompanied by his son Noah and "Glaswegian maniac" Nat. "You have this Scot and this black kid from south London who have been stripped of their entire lives because they've crossed paths with John," explains Campbell. "They play a pretty integral part in the story, which is really about forcing John to come to terms with what he's done to these people.





Getting a bus over to the USA is no easy task...

> **"Dream is sort of the initiator of this entire arc and Swamp Thing plays a massive role"**

"Swamp Thing, being the contemplative, eternal entity that he is, is the one who through the series forces him to do that, because John desperately needs something from Swamp Thing, who is not eager to help. It really forces John to rethink who he is, because who he is plays very much into the reasons why Swamp Thing doesn't want to become involved in the first place and wants to just wash his hands of humanity as a whole."

Constantine is very different to the "cosmic horror" of *The Flash*, which Spurrier currently also scripts for DC. "*The Flash* is far more science fiction-y and is about big mathematical and cosmological ideas that speak to time and space," he says. "John and Hellblazer have always been more interested in the sort of very

The main cover for issue one, by Aaron Campbell.

human expressions of darkness, which starts with a germ of what humans will do to each other and then extrapolates it outwards.

"That's how you get every monster, every nightmare, everything that has become like a campfire story. So it couldn't be more different. I'm quite comfortable in both of those extremes, but John's voice is very much more my voice in a way that Wally West's is not."

After *Hellblazer*'s demise in 2020, Spurrier teamed up with artist Charlie Adlard on Boom! Studios's *Damn Them All*, which explores similar spooky themes. "*Damn Them All* is essentially a story that begins with the death of a character who's very much like Constantine," he says. "But then it spins out into something that's much more grindhouse-y, crime-orientated and more misanthropic than *Hellblazer*."

John Constantine, Hellblazer: Dead In America issue one is out on 16 January.

SCI-FACT! ***Swamp Thing* 37 was the first episode of the epic American Gothic storyline.**

NEWS WARP
HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Nicholas Hoult is Lex Luthor in **Superman: Legacy**, with Skyler Gisondo and Sara Sampaio signed as Jimmy Olsen and Eve Teschmacher.

→ Eli Roth bringing us a sequel to seasonal slasher **Thanksgiving**.

→ Francis Lawrence helming adaptation of Richard Bachman (aka Stephen King)'s **The Long Walk**.

→ *Doom Patrol*'s Ezra Claytan Daniels writing the remake of **The People Under The Stairs**.

→ Robert Eggers's **Nosferatu** casts its spindly shadow on 25 December 2024.

→ Ethan Hawke leads the cast for a sequel to **The Black Phone**.

→ *Loki*'s Michael Waldron replacing Jeff Loveness as screenwriter of **Avengers: The Kang Dynasty**.

→ Danielle Brooks joining Jason Momoa in the **Minecraft** movie.

→ Wes Ball directing live-action adaptation of **The Legend Of Zelda**.

→ Melissa Barrera and Jenna Ortega exiting **Scream VII**.

→ Sequel to **The Blackening** now in development.

FERDA DEMIR/GETTY

Percy plays with his sword. Well, he *is* a teen, after all.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Trident Trio

Author Rick Riordan on how he ensured the **Percy Jackson** series got his stories right

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

DISAPPOINTED FANS DON'T often get a second chance when a beloved book gets botched in a Hollywood adaptation. Take the legions of readers who adore author Rick Riordan's YA fantasy series *Percy Jackson & The Olympians*, who are still smarting from director Chris Columbus's 2010 retooling of *The Lightning Thief* into an aged-up movie that barely resembled the source work.

Movie Percy only survived two instalments, while Riordan went on to sell more than 180 million copies of his six-book saga about a boy who learns that he's the son of Poseidon.

But that kind of success makes studios like Disney incentivised to try and get it right, which is why *Percy Jackson And The Olympians* has been reimagined into a Disney+ series with Riordan and his wife, Rebecca, executive-producing. The first two episodes immediately presented fans with a far more book-faithful story, along with age-appropriate portrayals of Percy (Walker Scobell) and his magical besties, Annabeth (Leah Sava Jeffries) and the satyr Grover (Aryan Simhadri).

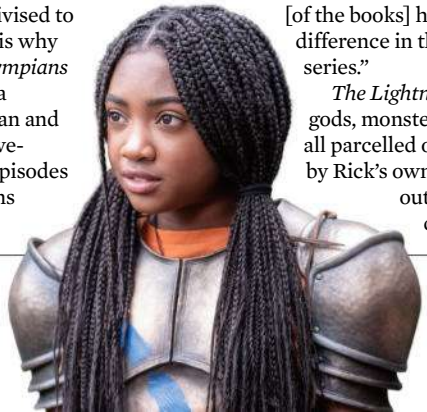
Fixing what wasn't broken is a big part of why Riordan signed up to be a creative on the series, working alongside showrunners Jonathan E Steinberg and Dan Shotz.

"The film and TV industry is rightly nervous of doing things that are child-centred, because there is a worry that a story with children as the main characters will not appeal to adults," Rick explains to Red Alert. "But being able to keep the tone, the humour, the sense of wonder and the coming of age elements [of the books] has really made all the difference in the world with this series."

The Lightning Thief is chock-full of gods, monsters, creatures and magic, all parcelled out across eight episodes by Rick's own hand. "I had done an outline, and we never really deviated from that too much," he says. He adds that readers will also get some new material, seeing how Percy's mother Sally (Virginia Kull) and Poseidon (Toby Stephens) first met, as well as a lot more of Annabeth's back story. "It was really nice to have the luxury of developing that in the later episodes, and watching the three kids come together as a team."

> **"Our first priority was to protect and nurture our kids; that was what this village was about"**

Speaking of his trio of leads, Rick says, "We went into this in agreement that our first



Aryan Simhadri, Leah Sava Jeffries, Walker Scobell.

priority was to protect and nurture our three kids; that was what this village was about. A secondary goal was to create a great television show. But we had to make sure that the kids were okay first. My favourite thing about the whole process has been getting to know the kids and their families, working with them and getting to see them grow in real time as we're filming."

Both Riordans were part of the exhaustive casting process, viewing thousands of auditions to find their Percy. "We had some favourites, and then Walker showed up," Rebecca says of Scobell's audition. "He didn't have a whole lot of experience at that point and was raw. But his work ethic is amazing. So we locked Percy pretty quick because we didn't want anybody to take him. Then it was finding Annabeth and Grover, which also happened very quickly."

Rick continues, "Leah and Ariana just immediately rose to the top. Their chemistry was an important part of it, because it's one thing to have three incredible actors, but it's another thing to have three incredible actors who work well together, and they have that. They are so central to the entire season, as they're on screen for almost every scene of every episode."

The kids join a roster of seasoned character actors playing adult gods and monsters, including Glynn Turman, Jason Mantzoukas, Megan Mullally and (as Hermes) Lin-Manuel Miranda – Rick's own casting coup.

"I had corresponded with him before, simply because his son is a fan of the book," Rick says of their prior acquaintance. "A lot of the actors came to us because of that.

"So we just kind of did a Hail Mary to Lin and said, 'I know you've got a million things going on, but if you've ever wanted to be a Greek god, we got a part for you.'" Look for Lin to appear in episode six...

Percy Jackson And The Olympians is on Disney+.

SCI-FACT! **Riordan teases that this series' version of Medusa is less of a villain and has more of a sympathetic sisterhood with Percy's mum.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Lunar Cycle

The Immortal Moon Knight and the new Power Man duke it out in this year's **Timeless** WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER JED MACKAY'S FOCUS ON Kang the Conqueror in the first two volumes, this year's *Timeless* one-shot not only features a new main protagonist in the Immortal Moon Knight, but is also written by a new team: Collin Kelly and Jackson Lanzing.

"Tom Brevoort called and when Tom calls, you answer," laughs Lanzing, referring to Marvel's Executive Editor. "This call was a specific challenge – which was to move on from centring the *Timeless* specials around Kang and utilise a new format to do what Jed had done so well in the previous two.

"Together, we cracked the idea of centring a brand new 'end of time' for the Marvel Universe – one that we could use to examine the meaning of these characters in the grand scheme of history.

"Making 40 pages feel like an event is no small feat," he continues, "but with the entire timeline of the Marvel Universe in our hands, we dedicated ourselves to having some extremely high-octane fun while asking ourselves a simple, haunting question: what does it mean to be the last hero standing, at the end of all things, when there's nothing left to save?"

With the modern-day incarnation currently meeting his maker in the Jed MacKay-scripted *The Death Of Moon Knight* and the upcoming *Vengeance Of The Moon Knight*, this is definitely the Lunar Legionnaire's time to shine. "Why Moon Knight?" asks Kelly, who alongside Lanzing also scripts *Guardians Of The Galaxy* and *Thunderbolts* for Marvel. "Because he's one of the few superheroes who comes pre-corrupted – a character who owes his existence and power-set to a very strange and unknowable figure in Khonshu. He's in the employ of a god, so what happens when that god decides he's done sharing all that worship?"

"This story takes place decades in the future, so who's to say that's even Marc Spector under the mask?" adds Lanzing. "Jed's done a wonderful job expanding the Moon Knight mythos, so in picking up this title, we wanted to not only pay tribute to that but also drive it even further into those strange, very dark places that only Moon Knight can go."

The variant cover for *Timeless*, by InHyuk Lee.

With Brevoort noting that it is "a good, primal sort of name that hasn't really been in active use all that much in the past decade or two," Kelly and Lanzing also introduce a mysterious new Power Man, who takes on the mantle previously adopted by Luke Cage and Victor Alvarez.

"He's a character with deep roots in the Marvel Universe – both personally and through his myriad powers," says Lanzing "He's known as the Master of the Living Weapons, wielding the Iron Fist, the blood of the Hulk, and dual power-sets of the Sentry and the Void. When all is said and done, he might be the single most powerful human in

the Marvel Universe. But even that doesn't guarantee victory in this story as the stakes are as high as they get – and they don't call Moon Knight immortal for nothing."

Power Man is pitted against the Moon Knight Unending in a bleak dystopian future, which has been completely devastated by an unholy combination of Starktech, the Eternal Machine and the malevolent Moon God. "For Power Man, it has meant perseverance," explains Kelly. "As other heroes through the years have fallen to catastrophe, he alone has been left to watch the consequences unfold: a future of our world in the gleaming grip of Khonshu's cruel power.

"Executing Khonshu's will is Moon Knight, his avatar, but one who has taken the power of the fallen heroes for himself. With the technology of Iron Man, the magic of Doctor Strange and the wisdom of the Eternals, the Immortal Moon Knight stands ready to fulfil Khonshu's dream, and end all life on our world.

"As for Power Man, he's had decades to prepare for this fight, and as gamma green glows in his veins, and his fist begins to glow with power, he knows that this is a fight that will either save the future or end it."

With Lanzing describing him as "a superstar with a simultaneous mastery of both scale and character," he and Kelly are enjoying collaborating with artist Juann Cabal. "It's been an honour working with Juann, and those same skills also make him perfect for this story," he says.

"Anyone who has read Collin's and my work knows that we're pretty obsessed with setting character-focused stories against enormous scope and scale and bringing out unexpected notes in both. Juann enhances that tenfold."

> **We dedicated ourselves to having some extremely high-octane fun**

Timeless issue one (2023) is out on 27 December.

SCI-FACT! **Kelly and Lanzing also write *Batman Beyond: Neo-Gothic* and *The Outsiders* for DC.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Fifth and final season of **Star Trek: Discovery** arriving April 2024.
- Amazon and The Jim Henson Company teaming on **Faerie**, inspired by the work of Brian and Wendy Froud.
- **Harley Quinn** renewed for a fifth season.
- Iman Vellani voicing Ms Marvel in animated **Marvel Zombies** series.
- Netflix cancelling **Shadow And Bone** after two seasons.
- New live-action spin-off **The Boys: Mexico** in development from *Blue Beetle*'s Gareth Dunnet-Alcocer.
- Jonathan Frakes set to direct episodes of **Star Trek: Strange New Worlds** season three.
- Timothy Olyphant and David Rysdahl joining Noah Hawley's **Alien** prequel series.
- **Black Mirror** returning for a seventh season.
- Animated feature **The Witcher: Sirens Of The Deep** heading for Netflix in late 2024.
- **La Brea** concluding with a third season of just six episodes.
- **Terminator: The Anime Series** on its way from *Ghost In The Shell* studio Production IG.

CBS STUDIOS

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Nuclear Family

Louise Simonson and June Brigman celebrate **Power Pack**'s 40th anniversary WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

FOUR DECADES AFTER THEY first collaborated on the adventures of Alex, Julie, Jack and Katie Power, Louise "Weezie" Simonson and June Brigman are returning to tell another tale of the superheroic siblings. Billed as a "retro series", *Into The Storm* follows on from the continuity of the original *Power Pack*, which ran for 62 issues from 1984 to 1990.

"This story takes place a year after Power Pack first got their powers, opening at the restored beach house where it all began,

It's like the Power Pack have never been away.

and Alex has just had his thirteenth birthday in a recent one-shot comic, so he's officially a teenager," says Simonson, referring to 2019's *Power Pack Grow Up*. "It's been especially fun to focus on Power Pack's early years since some of the Pack's adventures as older kids have been covered elsewhere."

"In honour of Power Pack's fortieth, Marvel wanted to get the band back together," adds Brigman. "So we went back to the '80s, and pretty much picked up right where we left off."

With Simonson joining Marvel in 1980, *Power Pack* grew out of an edict from editor-in-chief Jim Shooter that all editors should also accept freelance assignments in addition to their staff roles. "I didn't want to take some other writer's job, so I figured if I made something new, it wouldn't be taking work from anyone else," she recalls.

"I came up with the idea of four kids with superpowers, which Shooter said to write up. So I wrote a first complete plot, roughs of the next three issues, and character descriptions for the kids and other characters. Then June Brigman came into my office, looking for work.

"I liked her art but all my books already had great artists, so I asked her if she could draw kids, which is harder than you might think. She said she used to draw portraits of kids and others at [theme park] Six Flags, so I handed her the plot and character descriptions and said, 'Draw the kids and if I like what you do, I'll present us to Shooter as a team.' I loved what she did – the kids were so much themselves and brimming with personality. I turned the proposal in to Shooter and he loved it."

> **"In honour of Power Pack's fortieth, Marvel wanted to get the band back together"**

"Getting *Power Pack* was serendipity, being in the right place at the right time with the right skills," continues Brigman. "Weezie asked me if I knew how to draw children and I'd had some experience of drawing kids. At the time, there were lots of artists who were really good at drawing big hyper-muscled superheroes but children, not so much."

Into The Storm begins with Franklin Richards (son of Sue Storm and Reed Richards) having a premonition of an ominous galactic threat heading towards Earth; he plays a significant role in what unfolds, as Power Pack are caught up in a cosmic conflict between the Snark and the Brood.

"Franklin is an important part of the story, as his dream power is growing and getting stronger, although he's better able to control it now," says Simonson, who also explores the tricky subject of whether the quartet should tell their parents about their nascent abilities.

"The story asks that question, but the theme is really about family and duty – the kids' responsibility to their parents versus their real need to occasionally risk their lives and save the world," she continues. "Franklin is also an example of what Power Pack are afraid of, since his power is so scary his parents put a dampner on it, and the kids don't want that to happen to them."

"Franklin and Power Pack go way back to the original series, as he and Katie had dust-ups before they became friends," adds Brigman. "And now Alex, Julie and Jack treat him like their little brother."

It is Franklin who recruits Storm to assist in their battle against the two warring alien races. "The Brood are just gross and scary, so we figured Storm would be a useful ally against them," laughs Simonson. "We also thought it would be fun to introduce a new Snark villain – Maraud's daughter Mayhem."

"All the kids are in awe of Storm," adds Brigman. "But Jack might have a little crush on her, and why wouldn't he? She's gorgeous, brave and has a cool mohawk hairdo!"

Power Pack: Into The Storm issue one is out on 24 January.

SCI-FACT! **While *Power Pack* was originally inked by Bob Wiacek, *Into The Storm* is inked by Brigman's husband Roy Richardson.**

SCI-FACT! **According to Al Ewing, artist Luciano Vecchio "knows his tarot, which has come in handy..."**

The cover art for issue two, by Stefano Caselli.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Back To Life

Al Ewing on bringing back the X-Men's villain-turned-hero in **Resurrection Of Magneto**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE BRINGING a character back from the dead almost became an everyday occurrence for the Merry Mutants during the Krakoan Age, due to their Resurrection Protocols, Magneto didn't have that option after he perished in *X-Men Red* issue seven during 2022's *Avengers X-Men Eternals: Judgment Day* crossover.

But now the Master of Magnetism is making a comeback in a new four-issue miniseries, which sees him emerge into a much-changed world after the events of *Fall Of X*.

"Making Magneto's death meaningful – so meaningful that readers didn't want him to return – was a tricky proposition," says writer Al Ewing, who is joined on the title by artist Luciano Vecchio. "So I was pleased that we managed to pull it off, as even in an era where X-deaths were deliberately casual, Magneto's final moments didn't leave a dry eye in the house."

DEAD HARD

Ewing maintains that Magneto's sacrifice was necessary if *Judgment Day* was to have a real impact. "If we were putting Planet Arakko through the wringer, we had to reflect that in a way that *X-Men* readers would vibe with on a deep level, and killing off Magneto would be what hit them where they lived," he adds. "And from the moment we made that decision, I had how and why he'd be resurrected in mind."

Stressing that "we've been playing this game for a while," Ewing insists that he and his fellow X-writers deliberately made it easy to revive previously deceased characters. "That was the entire point of the exercise, to tell different stories and do different things," he says. "So from a story point of view, it's not that all the other resurrections were too easy, it's that Magneto's had to be difficult.

"In order to tell a different story – both from a Krakoan story of death and from the more traditional arc of the superhero return – we have to go deep into the resurrection, make it a real quest into the after-world in the manner of an ancient myth. It's always swinging the pendulum the other way."

Having been the focal point of *X-Men Red*, Storm continues to play a significant role in *Resurrection Of Magneto*. "Magneto and Storm have a very unique relationship that's been built up over a number of years – almost since Chris Claremont's first moves towards humanising Magneto," explains Ewing, referring to how the long-time *Uncanny X-Men* writer expanded the character's backstory in the '80s. "There's been a connection between them that's been well explored over the years, and we got to explore that dynamic again in *X-Men Red*, so this is a continuation of that."

Ewing won't go into too much detail about how Magneto's revival happens, although he confirms that it ties into the current series *Fall Of The House Of X* and *Rise Of The Powers Of X*.

"The only thing I can really reveal is that it won't be by the usual Krakoan methods," he teases. "He has been resurrected that way in the past, but he's rejected that method, and as a result the way back will be much harder for him. Storm, meanwhile, is a rarity in the Krakoan era in that she's never died, even once, so this may be the first time."

Resurrection Of Magneto issue one is out 24 January.

The *Official Doctor Who Podcast.*

Pest Control and *The Forever Trap*: coming to vinyl.

Russell T Davies talks to Alan Yentob.

Revisit "Wild Blue Yonder" on iPlayer.

Tennant in the CBeebies *Bedtime Story.*

Red Alert

SFX

SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO

◆ Season one, episode two, coming later in 2024, is called "The Devil's Chord".

◆ **Music from "The Church On Ruby Road" was released on 11 December. "The Goblin Song" is available free on BBC Sounds and can be purchased on other platforms, with all proceeds going to Children In Need.**

◆ Viewing figures for "The Star Beast" provided the biggest audience for *Doctor Who* in five years, reaching 7.6 million people. It was the biggest drama launch of 2023.

◆ **Big Finish shows no sign of slowing down, with a slew of new releases announced. Tenth Doctor box set *Defender Of The Earth*, narrated by Jacob Dudman, was released in November. Dudman retires from playing the role of the Eleventh Doctor in February's *Victory Of The Doctor*, which sees the return of the New Paradigm Daleks. Audio novel *The Chaos Cascade* pits the Twelfth Doctor against Missy in January, while *Master! Planet Doom* reunites Paul McGann and Eric Roberts (guest starring the Axons) and is released in February.**

***Revolution In Space*, featuring the Third Doctor and Sarah Jane Smith, is also released in February.**

***Sontarans vs Rutans* is a new four-part series releasing monthly from January to celebrate 50 years of the clone warriors, guest starring four different Doctors and featuring the return of former Eighth Doctor companions C'rizz and Charley.**

Big Finish Day 2024 will take place in London's Cadogan Hall on 8 June. Details can be found at bigfinish.com.

◆ *The Official Doctor Who Podcast* revealed their host line-up as Juno Dawson, Tyrell Charles and Christel Dee, with guest appearances by showrunner Russell T Davies.

◆ **In-vision commentaries for "The Star Beast", "The Giggle" and "The Church On Ruby Road" are now available on BBC iPlayer.**

◆ Audio adventures *Pest Control* and *The Forever Trap*, narrated by David Tennant and Catherine Tate, will be released in a six-LP box set by Demon Records on 24 May.

◆ **David Tennant read the CBeebies *Bedtime Story* "The Way Back Home" on Friday 24 November. It's now available on BBC iPlayer.**

◆ *Doctor Who: Adventures In Water And Light In Cardiff Bay* was a special after-dark water-based projection celebrating the 60th anniversary, which ran for three days from 23 November. Footage of the audio-visual spectacle is now available online.

◆ **Ncuti Gatwa made a surprise appearance in the repeat of *An Adventure In Space And Time* on 23 November. The scene, previously featuring Matt Smith, was originally filmed in such a way as to allow future actors playing the Doctor to be included.**

◆ CBBC and iPlayer were home to a special *Blue Peter* Doctor Who takeover on 15 December, featuring the competition winner on an access-all-areas trip to Bad Wolf Studios in Cardiff, where they met the cast and crew.

◆ **Documentary *Imagine... Russell T Davies: The Doctor And Me* aired on BBC One on 18 December. It's now available on BBC iPlayer.**

◆ Roundel Publishing has announced a new range of books celebrating the creative forces behind Doctor Who. The first, launched on Kickstarter, is *The DNA Of Doctor Who: The Philip Hinchcliffe Years.*

Doctor Who is avilable on BBC iPlayer and Disney+.

SCI-FACT! Only episode four of "The Celestial Toymaker" – "The Final Test" – exists complete in the BBC archive.

Antlers look cool, but they're a pain to sleep on.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Hell's Bells!

Former YouTuber turns homegrown pilot into adult animated series **Hazbin Hotel**

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

IN THE WORLD OF YOUTUBE creators, Vivienne Medrano is a gold standard example of a self-made success story. An illustrator and animator who worked under the moniker "VivziePop", Medrano joined the platform in 2012 to share her self-made comic *ZooPhobia*, along with a progression of colourful, highly stylised animated shorts centred on an array of Hell-based characters.

By 2016, Medrano's following was so large that it enabled her to start a Patreon to fund her own animation studio, SpindleHorse Toons, in order to create a pilot episode for her passion project *Hazbin Hotel*. Four years and 92 million YouTube views later, that pilot has evolved into a brand-new, A24-produced series of the same name for Prime Video.

Hazbin Hotel's premise and genre-defying tone has remained the same, with Medrano serving as the showrunner, director and a writer, working with animation studio Bento Box Entertainment to bring the ambitious show to life. *Hazbin* mingles familiar Biblical characters from Heaven and Hell with new characters like series protagonist Charlie Morningstar (Erika Henningsen), and unfolds like a goth Broadway musical with a foul-mouthed sensibility.

"There aren't that many horror musicals that are a raunchy R-rated comedy centring around queer and female characters," Medrano says with a laugh to Red Alert. "But it's definitely a combination of so many things I love: mythology, musicals and villains.

"I had to figure out, 'How do I put all that into a blender?' But I wasn't really thinking about how outside-the-box it was until we started the pitching process. Then I realised how much of a rare, can't-put-it-in-a-current-box thing this was, which makes it exciting."

Medrano is getting the chance to improve her self-made pilot into the series she always envisioned. It focuses on Charlie, the hyper-positive daughter of Lucifer (Jeremy Jordan), who is quite the anomaly in jaded, hedonistic Hell. She's surrounded by villains, but just enough friends, like lover Vaggie (Stephanie Beatriz) and porn dilettante Angel Dust (Blake Roman), who want to help her turn the hotel into a redemption halfway house for souls that should go back to Heaven.

She's just got to convince Heaven's arsehole naysayers, like original man Adam. "The big theme of the show is the grey between these

Charlie Morningstar gets menaced, menacingly.

Lucifer Morningstar is the ruler of Hell.

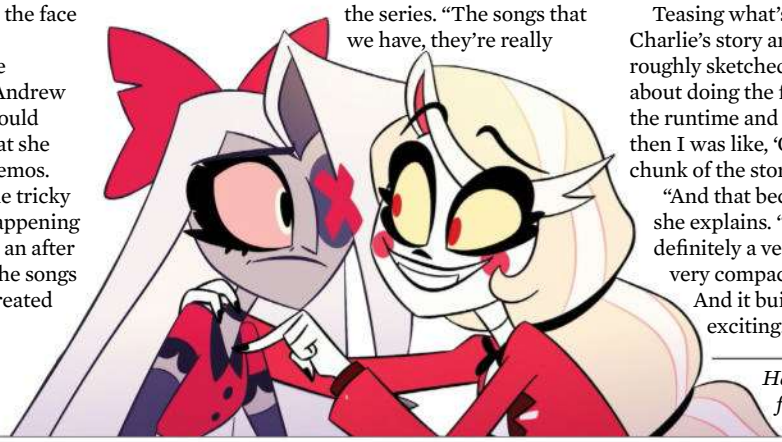
two pillars of good and evil," Medrano explains. "I think every season is going to challenge Charlie in a different way, but this season is asking if [her dream] is possible, and keeping up her determination in the face of so much adversity."

Every episode will also feature original songs by Sam Haft and Andrew Underberg; Medrano says she would provide them with briefs for what she needed in a song, and get back demos.

"With season one, it was a little tricky because the scriptwriting was happening before the songwriting, so it was an after the fact thing to go back and fit the songs in. Plus, for each episode, they created both songs in a week each time because of the pipeline. Yet they came up with such bangers," she explains.

> **"There aren't that many horror musicals that are a raunchy R-rated comedy"**

Singing those bangers is a fresh vocal cast that includes big musical theatre names like Darren Criss (*Glee*), Daphne Rubin-Vega (*Rent*) and the aforementioned Beatriz (*Encanto*). "I wanted to be very honest to what was established, but also what was going to be required of the show with the singing," Medrano says of the recasting from her pilot to the series. "The songs that we have, they're really complex. They're hard, even for Broadway singers. In [my] pilot, we split the singing roles and the speaking roles. For the series, I just felt that it's really good when you have the opportunity to have someone who can do both."



Already hard at work on season two of *Hazbin Hotel*, Medrano says she's feeling even more excited about the stories to come for Charlie and her underworld posse of misfits. "Season one was definitely a learning curve," she admits. "But I think it made me a stronger director, and I also love the story itself, making it and that it got to stay so intact with my vision."

Teasing what's to come, she says she's got Charlie's story arc developed, with seasons roughly sketched out. "What was exciting about doing the first season was we were given the runtime and the amount of episodes, and then I was like, 'Okay, how do I tell this first chunk of the story in that time?'

"And that became the biggest challenge," she explains. "But I feel like we did it. It's definitely a very brisk season, but I think it's very compact and tells a *really* fun story. And it builds to something really exciting."

Hazbin Hotel is on Prime Video from 19 January.

SCI-FACT! **Medrano has another self-made, Hell-centric series, *Helluva Boss*, that she produced after she completed the *Hazbin Hotel* pilot.**

SCI-FACT! **Like most of the X-Men, the Avengers, along with the Fantastic Four and Spider-Man, were also killed off in "Days Of Future Past".**

Cover art for the first issue, by Daniel Acuña.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Endgame

Chip Zdarsky asks what if Earth's Mightiest Heroes were no more in **Avengers: Twilight**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

GROWING OUT OF editor Tom Brevoort's idea for "a future-set Avengers tale", *Avengers: Twilight* takes place three decades from now, in a prosperous America that doesn't have any need for Earth's Mightiest Heroes to exist – although things are apparently not what they seem.

"When Tom pitched it to me, I was excited right away as I really like telling stories that are a little outside of continuity," writer Chip Zdarsky tells Red Alert. "Plus, I really like working with Tom, so it was a no-brainer. Being able to put new spins on so many classic characters was just too tempting."

The six-parter centres on Steve Rogers, no longer Captain America, who is faced with either assembling his own team of heroes or leading a ragtag group of Defenders, whose ranks include the expert military marksman known as Bullseye.

"Bullseye has been a real joy to write and develop," says Zdarsky. "It's always fun creating new antagonists. As for the line-up, everything came from the story and the world. Steve Rogers is obviously the focal point, but I really wanted to consider what the various Avengers would be doing in this time and how they'd be a part of this story. Though I will admit that a lot of those decisions revolve around who I wanted to write!"

Zdarsky was given plenty of leeway to branch out from the established continuity of the current Marvel Universe. "A lot of what's different in this timeline stems from a crucial event in the Avengers' history known as H-Day, where the world changed," he explains. "From that point, I just try and figure out, logically and emotionally, where certain characters would end up."

While he insists that he "doesn't want to give away anything by citing examples", Zdarsky has taken inspiration from similar dystopian storylines, such as *Uncanny X-Men*'s "Days Of Future Past". "There has been a ton of great future-based stories, so it's been fun trying to put my stamp on this one while reimagining elements from previous stories," he says, admitting that he's also been influenced by what has happened recently in the real world.

"The funny thing is, I started writing this in 2019 and a lot has changed in the world since then," he continues. "There's one scene towards the end of the series that was eerily predictive. So much so that I considered changing it, but the story revolved around that moment too much."

Captain America also receives a distinctive new uniform courtesy of artist Daniel Acuña. "Honestly, I just let Daniel go wild on the costumes, as he's unbelievably good at design, so the outfits and world are fully him," says Zdarsky. "He's just the best, and every page is gorgeous. Illustrating a team book is hard enough for any artist, but when you also have to redesign everything, it's a monumental amount of work. This book has taken years to get to this stage, but it's just so beautiful. I hope people really get lost in Daniel's illustrations."

Avengers: Twilight issue one is out on 17 January.

SCI-FACT! **Butler tried to persuade Roddenberry to retitle the show *Star Track*, thinking *Trek* was "too heavy".**

NEW AUTHOR

GEORGIA SUMMERS

MEET THE FORMER TOR EDITOR BEHIND FANTASY NOVEL *THE CITY OF STARDUST*

GEORGIA SUMMERS

Tell us about your protagonist – what's her story?

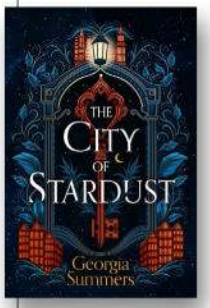
→ Violet Everly is the last heir to a fatal family curse. She grows up alone, so she lives inside stories, until she finds herself in one as she attempts to break the curse. And it's more wondrous and terrifying than anything she could have imagined.

How does magic work in this world?

→ Those who possess magical ability, or talent, can walk between worlds with the aid of a key. But their understanding of worlds-walking is borrowed from a lost history, and therefore fragmented.

How long did the book take to write? Did it evolve much?

→ I started it in November 2019, just before the pandemic, and finished in May 2022. The bones of it are the same – the beginning and end land in roughly the same places emotionally. But there was a lot of rewriting.



And advice for would-be writers?

→ It's old but sound advice: read everything. Fantasy, sci-fi, literary, crime, history, biographies, essays, literary criticism – whatever you can get your hands on. Some of my biggest inspirations have come from the most unexpected places.

What are you working on next?

→ A book thief inherits a magical bookshop and gets tangled up in shady conspiracies, ink magic, and murder. Not to mention a rival bookseller determined to claim the bookshop for himself.

The City Of Stardust is out on 25 January, published by Hodderscape.

THE FINAL FRONTIER

ROBERT BUTLER 1927-2023

The first director onboard the Enterprise

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

A PROLIFIC, EMMY-WINNING TV director Robert Butler saw himself as "a hired gun", but his peers in the industry regarded him as the Pilot King, a man whose magic touch ensured success for such small-screen classics as *Batman*, *Moonlighting* and *Star Trek*.

Born in Los Angeles, Butler broke into TV working as an usher at CBS. Graduating to stage manager and then director, he soon proved his versatility, helming everything from comedies to Westerns and detective shows, refining a style he described as "very real, very dry and very naturalistic".

In 1964 Gene Roddenberry wanted that crucial sense of verisimilitude for "The Cage", the pilot episode of *Star Trek*. Butler hesitated to accept the offer at first, finding the script hard to follow.

He was also concerned by the pacing of the episode – "so he added exclamation points to everything," recalled producer Robert H Justman. The network ultimately shared Butler's doubts about the finished product, including his reservations over star Jeffrey Hunter, cast as Captain Pike, and demanded a second pilot. Roddenberry wanted Butler to direct this too, but this time he refused.

Earning genre credits on *The Twilight Zone* and *The Invaders*, Butler also launched *Batman* with the episode "Hi Diddle Diddle" in 1966. Other fantastically-themed work included TV movies *Death Takes A Holiday* (1971), *Strange New World* (1975) and *Out Of Time* (1998), as well as Disney comedy *The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes* (1969) and the pilot of *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures Of Superman* in 1993.

In later years Butler admitted he was surprised by the sheer scale of the *Trek* phenomenon. "Not that I really measured it at the time. You just roll up your sleeves and decide what the hell it is you're trying to do. Then you jump in and never look back."

Robert Butler wins an Emmy for *Hill Street Blues* in 1981.

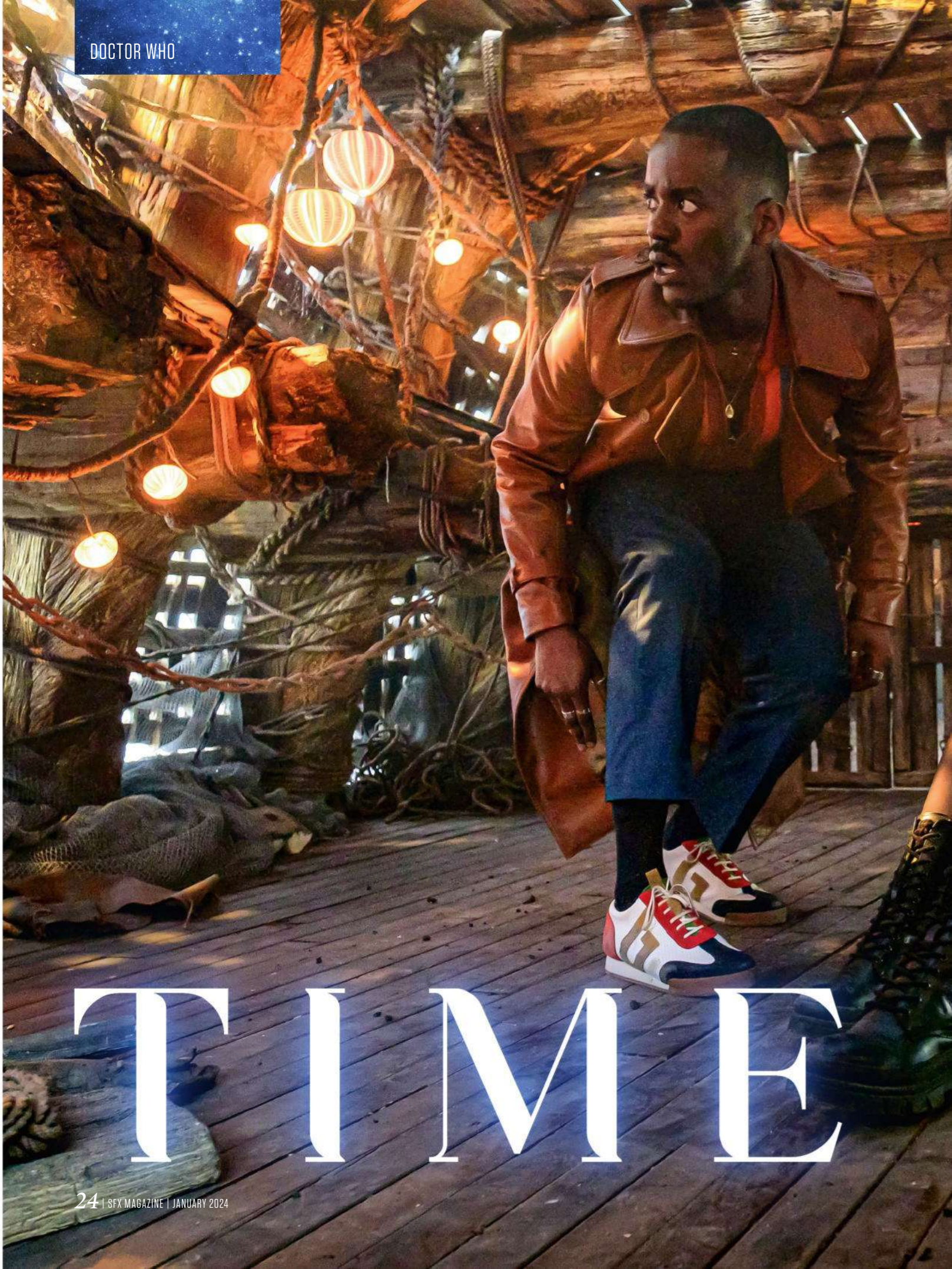
NBCU PHOTO BANK/NBCUNIVERSAL/GETTY

MARTY KROFFT 1937-2023

Co-creator, with brother Sid, of TV's *HR Pufnstuf* and *Land Of The Lost*.

ROGER KASTEL 1931-2023

American artist best known for the posters for *Jaws* and *The Empire Strikes Back*.



TIME

TEAM

NCUTI GATWA AND MILLIE GIBSON BEGIN THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME IN DOCTOR WHO

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

Ruby Sunday (Millie Gibson) is about to get Doctored.

“This is something different, because it sits so deeply in the hearts of the British public”

IT’S THE ANNIVERSARY WEEK OF *DOCTOR Who* and *SFX* is in a London hotel, opposite a legendary pub where fans used to meet, and in the shadow of the iconic BT Tower.

Ncuti Gatwa (in a Prada sweater, with shirt underneath, and yellow socks on display under cropped trousers) and Millie Gibson (a grey waistcoat, trousers and glasses that are “just for fashion, darling!”) are taking a day off filming season two to be introduced to select press with showrunner Russell T Davies. This interview has been edited for *laughter*.

◆ **What kind of Doctor are you going to be?**

NG: Ohhhh. I don’t want to say. Just ’cos I feel like... [mock-shouting] *I’m not telling you!* Because I don’t want to paint anyone’s perception of what my Doctor will be.

But I also don’t quite know. I don’t know until it’s released. But I would say, what I hear, is that he’s very human. He’s quite emotional. He’s a bit of a joker. And that’s all you’re getting.

I still am not the Doctor, in my head. This is like a bit of a dream, it’s not actually really happening. Until the show actually airs, I’m gonna be like, “Oh, wow. Ohhhh. I’m the Doctor.” An amazing dream.

◆ **Do you feel the same, Millie?**

MG: I do, I feel the exact same. People keep saying, “What does it feel like to be the companion?” It’s like, “I’m not yet!” I think it’s all gonna come at once, in a way. As soon as December hits, I think it’s gonna be like, “Oh god, yeah, we did film that.”

Who's this, and who's this? You'll know by now.

Danger, Ruby Sunday, danger!

With Carla (Michelle Greenidge).

NG: Because of the weight, because it's such an incredible show, and they're such incredible roles, it feels very... it feels too good to be true, sort of thing. You're just like, [shouts in surprise, points], "That's not the TARDIS there! That can't be real!" But it is, it is.

◆ What can you tell us about the characters' relationship?

MG: I've said this before, but they are like two schoolgirls gossiping. Very, like... plotting.

NG: *Plotting!*

MG: Very platonic. I think you see the love for each other from the beginning, and how much they care for one another. I think people will be thinking about their best friends when they watch her and the Doctor.

◆ You've both worked on shows with massive audiences. How does *Doctor Who* compare or feel different?

NG: It certainly does feel different. I have been a part of large projects in the past, but this is something particularly different, because it sits so deeply in the hearts of the British public. There's more of a level of care. Like, you want to care for it and nurture it... *more*? Not more, but you understand that there's such weight to this. It's 60 years of legacy and you want to protect that and you know how much it means to people. We've watched it and we became fans. It's like, "We've been passed the baton, and we have to keep it up". And I've never worked on a show with such a dedicated fandom before, as well. Which is another thing to look after.

MG: I think when the show comes to mind, it's different for everyone. You see a certain face. Whoever your Doctor is, when you think of *Doctor Who*, you see your Doctor. So I think it will be really flattering when this new generation that will watch it will think of your face [Ncuti] or, "That's my companion". It's going to be a really cool thing to be someone's Doctor, or someone's companion.

◆ What was the casting process like?

NG: Oh gosh, I just remember thinking, this is such a fun role, and it has everything in it. The scene that I got had everything in it. It started, like, what's the phrase? It started on the ground running?

RTD: It hit the ground running.

NG: [Laughs] "On the ground running"? It hits the ground running, but then also craziness was going on. But then also there was this really nice human moment with the Doctor and a companion and then it was funny, and then it was sweet and then heartwarming. And then danger. And then high stakes again. I just thought, "This is so much fun, it's got everything." And that feels very *Doctor Who* to me, this scene that's got everything...

RTD: That was a specially written script. Never seen on screen!

◆ Did you feel, "I can do this"? Or is there impostor syndrome when you're going for such a big role? →

PICTURES: YOSHITAKA KONO, JAMES PARDON, LARA CORNELL, BBC STUDIOS

This Goblin King is certainly no David Bowie.

NG: No, I felt like I could do it. But then also there's, like... what you become aware of when you're an actor in this industry is that there's so much outwith your control. What you hear all the time as an actor is, as soon as you walk into the room, they've already made the decision. So you could be great for the part, but there might be so many things just outwith your control, so many variables out of your control.

So you cannot go into anything being like, [claps hands] "Absolutely. This is mine! I've got it!" You just can't. Especially in something like this where it's such a prestigious role that you naturally would think that the odds are stacked up against you.

However, I was like, "I'm gonna have a lot of fun with this audition. Russell seems lovely. I'm gonna take my shoes off and I'm gonna have a grand old time."

RTD: He did take his shoes off. Why did you take your shoes off?

NG: I just felt like they were restricting me... It's interesting, all the jobs I've got have been the ones that I never thought that I'd get. Because I didn't think I'd get them, I'd just go in being like, "I'm just gonna go for gold."

MG: Yeah! That's what you did, honey.

NG: That's what I did.

What about you, Millie?

MG: I remember being in my room and watching the BAFTA Awards when you [Ncuti] got announced, and thinking, "Oh, he'll be great, I'm buzzing with that!" And then I go to bed and never think about it again! [Laughs] Then I got the audition through when I thought, "Yeah, let's leave *Corrie* [UK soap *Coronation Street*], see what happens – might go wrong." I'm just glad that Russell's a soap fan, bloody hell!

I remember I did my first self-tape and my agent, thankfully, went, "Do that again, because they won't like that." So I did do it again. I actually put this vest on – I don't know if you remember [Russell] but it looked like the TARDIS. I was like, "This'll get 'em!" Obviously, I got the recall.

I remember being in a Cafe Nero opposite in London, being *so* nervous. I've never been so

Anita Dobson as Mrs Flood. far from the Queen Vic.

"How did we get into this situation, again?"

Christmas vibes all round.

"My work here is done... oh hang on, no it isn't."

There's just no escaping Davina McCall, is there?

"I vote we go up." "And I vote down." "Hmm."

nervous for an audition. I remember going on my phone – "I'm just going to take my mind off it, I'll go on my phone" – and you [Russell] posted a picture of you all in the room. A massive selfie, like, "Happy Saturday!" I was like, "This is the room I've got to walk into in a few minutes!" It just made me more nervous, because I pictured everyone. As soon as I went in the waiting room, I heard your laugh and I was like, "I'm gonna be fine," and then I walked in and I was completely at ease. I heard the night before the NTA Awards. It was a quick audition process, compared to many, to be honest. But also it felt like the longest waiting experience ever.

◆ What do you respond to in Russell's writing? Is there a secret to playing his dialogue? Act like he's not here...

NG: [To Russell] Close your ears. I just love that it encapsulates everything, in that it's got such light and dark within it, the lightness of life and the darkness of life simultaneously, because that's just life. He's very particular about his words. So we have to get it right! But then it's always like, ah, damn, that *does* work. It does just work better if you say it exactly... *He knows his stuff*! It's just a joy to work on. It's challenging. I don't think I've felt myself be stretched this much as an actor. Which is cool.

MG: The first script I read, I remember – reading your scripts is like reading a book. I can picture what happens, I can see it all. Which is a really clever thing to do. It's so beautiful. It just brings it to life straightaway, really. For me it was like a whole new world, seeing that piece of writing, because it's nothing that I've ever really taken on before. So it was just an honour to be the ones to bring it to life.

RTD: It was probably episode four you read first.

MG: It was episode four. I didn't know if I could say that.

RTD: No, it's good stuff. That's quite an odyssey for Ruby.

MG: That was one of them where I remember reading it from Cardiff to Manchester in the car, and I just closed it and I was like, "Oh my god, I just want to reread it again." Yeah, it's a special episode, episode four.

RTD: You sent me the loveliest text. I'll never forget that.

◆ What was it like being on the TARDIS set for the first time?

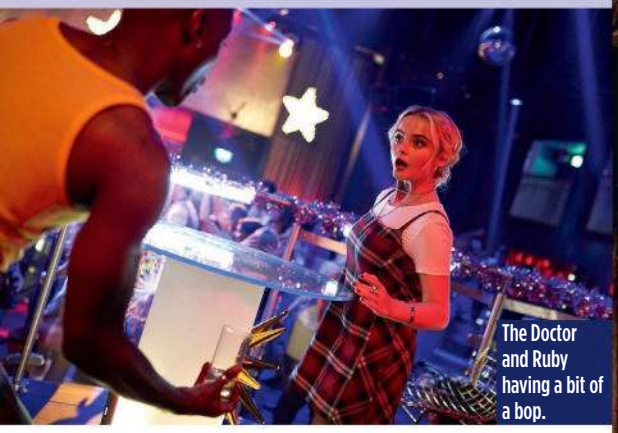
MG: I wasn't allowed to see it for some reason. Because everyone was sneaking me in and out, because no one could see who I was. I was under a brolly and a coat every time I came in. I was just like, "Can I go and see the TARDIS set?" They're like, "Nope, we have to get you back out now!" The first time I saw it, it was close to when I filmed on it. So my reaction for the scene is very much a real reaction.

NG: I remember seeing it from the back for the first time and I thought it was a car park, because it was so huge. I thought it was like the Bullring in Birmingham. I said, "Why is there a car park in the studio?" And then I went round and it was, "Oh, I see..." You get attached to it.

MG: The TARDIS was my favourite place to film on, because we just sat there swinging off the bars. People were like, "Millie, can you stop?"

◆ David Tennant said there was a call with you and Jodie Whittaker on the day you were announced...

NG: What happens between Doctors stays between Doctors. They were very, very warm and lovely and welcoming. It just felt like I had known them forever. They just gave me the best advice, "This is the best role. Enjoy it. There will be a lot more intense attention on →



The Doctor and Ruby having a bit of a bop.

> “The Doctor is always the Doctor, he’s never going to turn up with a knife, or swear”

The goblins know how to put on a show.

you than has ever been before”. I was like, “That can’t be right. I’ve just worked with Ryan Gosling!” And then I went home and people and paps were outside my house. I was like, “*I see*. I see. This is intense.”

I think I was just numb that day. I was in a bit of an autopilot. Because everything was so crazy. Like, I’ve been nominated for a BAFTA, for one thing. I’ve been announced as the Doctor. I’m going back to work tomorrow to work on *Barbie*. Everything was just like, “What? *What the hell is going on?*” [He says this almost exactly as he does in the trailer]. Just one foot in front of the other, speak to this person – done. Speak to this person. One foot in front of the other. Take it slowly.

◆ Are you keeping any kind of diary for future reference?

MG: We have texts. That’s it. I remember taking a lot of pictures of fittings and stuff like that. To be honest, I think when we watch the show we’ll think about so many memories that happened – but for now, all a blur. All a blur.

NG: Every set we were on: “Oh my *gosh*!” Taking pictures of everything, videoing everything. But you never know when you can [share]. Everything is always NDA-ed. Everything is always a spoiler. You can’t release anything. So they just sit in folders on the phone. When we’re not under NDA we shall release them to the world.

◆ What’s it like when you see your first alien or creature? Presumably you hadn’t seen any on *Coronation Street*...

[Both look at each other and laugh a lot]

MG: Well, actually...! I always say what’s so beautiful about *Doctor Who* is it’s not ever heavily CGI about the monsters and that’s what’s so nostalgic about them, because you can actually act with them. They make these monsters and you can really see them. It’s rarely that you just have to imagine them. I think that was really cool, actually seeing the monsters that they’ve built.

NG: Oh, the artistry that goes into creating the monsters is *second to none*. The sets on *Doctor Who* are just incredible. But I guess it took us a while to meet our first monster, because Christmas was...

RTD: Ah, that’s a hell of a monster!

NG: Oh no! Oh my gosh! FINE! Oh my god! OH MY GOSH! How could I forget about that?! Ahhh!

RTD: Goblins!

NG: Horrible! Horrible, horrible goblins! No, we did meet a monster... oh, fine.

MG: That’s what I’m saying. It was in the flesh.

NG: It’s the goblin king! [Sings] “The goblin king...”

MG: I found him cute. I liked him...

NG: Millie and Bella, my make-up artist, were obsessed.

MG: We warmed to him towards the end of it. I think we were a bit delirious, to be honest. I don’t know what was going on!

NG: You get attached to them. The second monster that we met was just very... [Whispers to Millie] Oooh! *Terrifying*. To begin with. But then we just fell in love with the chap that was playing the Boogeyman.

RTD: Oh. The Boogeyman.

NG: [Realising he’s shared a spoiler] I mean... *I mean, erm*...

◆ That’s a generic term.

NG: *That’s a generic term for a monster!* That’s a generic term for a monster. [Laughs] When the monster would have their head off and they’re just, like, sipping a juice box or something...

MG: He was just eating a banana at one point. I was like, “What is going on?”

NG: Lovely, lovely man.

MG: He was singing Nicki Minaj...

NG: We rapped Nicki Minaj together.

Um, Doctor? Don’t you have things to be doing?

MG: This is incredible.

NG: Where else would we have this? Where else?

◆ How does it feel that your first adventure together is going to be on Christmas Day?

MG: Christmas Day. Gosh. I just think a lot of people are going to be watching, probably. And that’s terrifying. Because when I watch the Christmas ep, I’m like, “Oh, that’s lovely,” and then I forget that it’s actually coming out. So that’s going to be weird.

Even people that don’t watch *Doctor Who* – ugh! – are going to be like, “Do you want to whip the new Christmas special on?” Do you

Davina dishes out some wisdom.

Cherry (Angela Wynter): cheers!

Expect these jackets to sell out.

This is all very "end of a *Twin Peaks* episode".

know what I mean? They're just gonna put it on. Just to see. Because it's Christmassy and it's feel-good. So yeah, that's terrifying. But I'm just hoping people will be very jolly on Prosecco when they're watching it.

RTD: It's a huge vote of confidence. It's marvellous that no one at the BBC said, "Oh, shall we show this on the 28th?" We absolutely bagged it.

MG: I mean, it is so Christmassy.

RTD: It's *gorgeous*.

MG: And the Christmas theme follows through for the series...

◆ **Russell, a question you get asked a lot...**

RTD: You should have followed what Millie says – that's a big clue! [Laughs]

MG: You skimmed right over that!

◆ **You would have said, "I can't say any more..." We're hardened to these ploys! So, writing a different Doctor, does the modulation change on the graphic equaliser?**

RTD: It does, actually. I mean the Doctor is always the Doctor, he's never going to turn up with a knife, or swear. [Laughs] So there's a common experience at the heart of it.

NG: Shank a Dalek!

RTD: But actually, having seen your audition [Ncuti], having seen your work, having met you, we talked to you, so there is a Ncuti energy that comes through. And this Doctor does say and do things that... when you referred to him being more emotional, that's actually quite a new fundamental spine in this Doctor.

It's a character who has very famously hidden his emotions for a long time, which you still do, which is still there, but actually, to be upset and to be happy – you take that to extraordinary new areas. You're probably not aware of that yourself. But you do. And it's wonderful. It feels like a whole new tapestry, a whole new canvas to play on. It makes it richer, it makes it deeper. It's lovely.

◆ **What was the process of choosing the look for the Doctor?**

NG: It's ongoing. It's an ongoing process. I remember coming into that first meeting with the producers and I had quite a staple, traditional costume idea. And they told *me*, they were like, "This is boring. This is very boring. We want to go *wild*. Let's go for gold". I thought [claps hands], "Oh! You picked the right boy! You've picked the right boy for that!"

Pam, our costume designer, is just incredible and sketches the most incredible pieces, and then shows them to me. It very much seems like it's all coming from me, but there's geniuses on this show that are very good at creating the show and put ideas in front of me and I just go, "Yeah". And then I get the credit. Which is lovely!

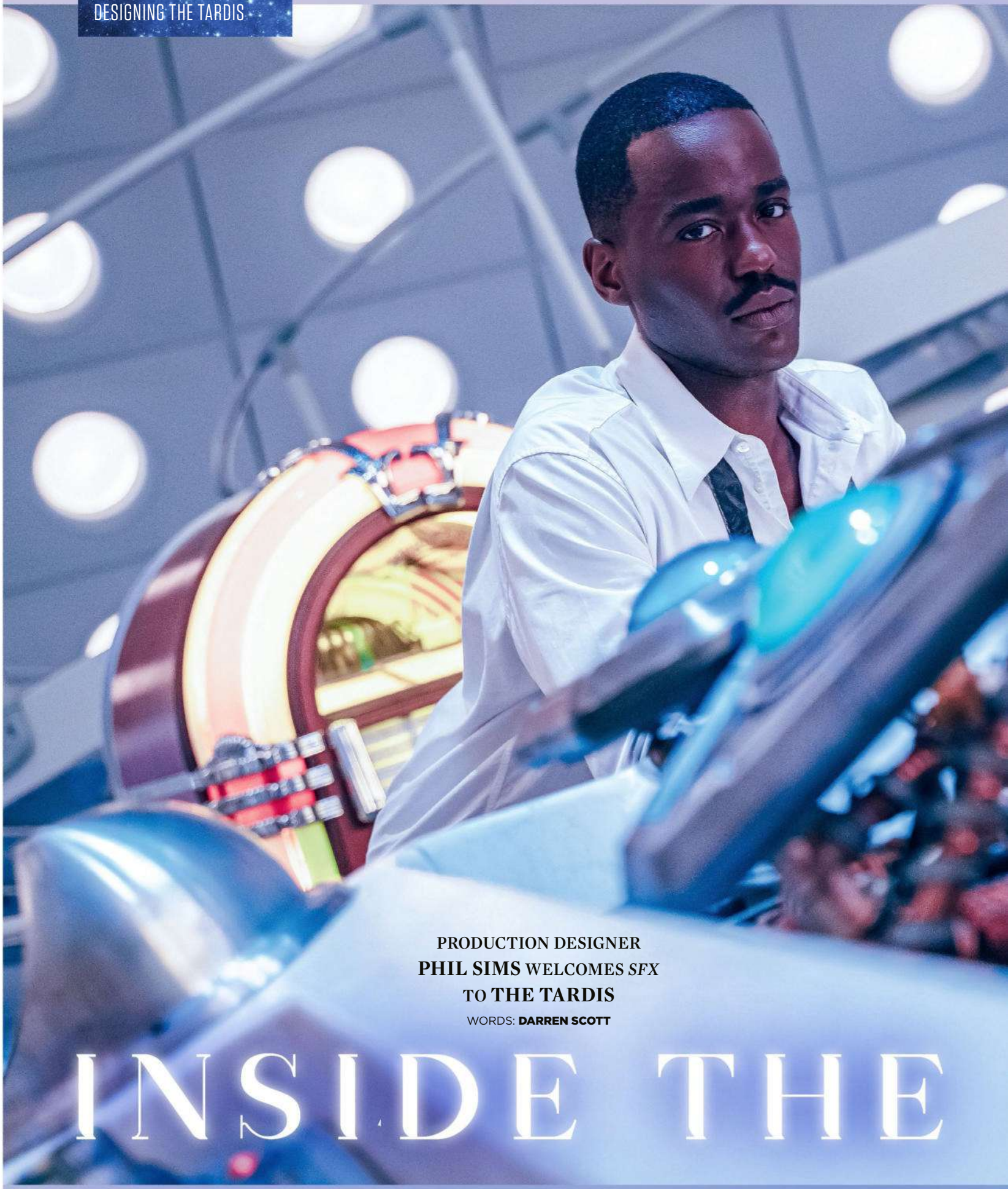
◆ **Is it the same palette, across the different costumes?**

NG: It's always dressed to fit my body and then skin tone. But also me and Pam want to go on a bit of a journey through British culture, and lots of British subcultures as well. Because it's a quintessential British show. I love fashion and I'm like, "We can explore this Doctor through fashion a little bit."

What it means to be British through fashion and all these kind of things. We're playing. It's always the background of what you then see as a finalised concept. It's very collaborative and fun. And long. Lots of fittings. *Lots* of fittings!

MG: Me and Pam were trying to find a pattern for Ruby, because every companion has a significant jacket or something that brings to mind, "Oh, yeah, Ruby's got that jacket". She's very cool. That's all I shall say. Stay tuned...

Doctor Who is on iPlayer and Disney+.



PRODUCTION DESIGNER
PHIL SIMS WELCOMES *SFX*
TO **THE TARDIS**

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

INSIDE THE

THE TWO DOCTORS

"[David and Ncuti] loved it and sort of danced into it together. It was lovely seeing them both together seeing the TARDIS. I think David had seen it already – he absolutely had – and then Ncuti came in and they were sort of beside themselves. It was lovely to see them having a TARDIS love-in."

SPACESHIP

Plenty of space for an excited Doctor to run around.

FOR A TIME MACHINE, TIME seems to stand still when you're inside the TARDIS. Because it's so mind-boggling and, quite frankly, overwhelming to step into – especially when you're doing so before it's been seen on television.

It's housed in Stage 6 at Wolf Studios in Cardiff – the biggest of them all. What you see on screen is all actually there physically. It's housed up metal steps, accessible via two flights, where the Police Box doors welcome you (and us, the first non-licensed publication on set) to the console room. It's *enormous*. When you hear it described as "cathedral-like", they're not exaggerating. But apparently that still wasn't quite enough...

"This is the tallest stage we have, 50 feet tall, and we couldn't build it to 50 feet because we need to make allowances for lights and structure and things above it," production designer Phil Sims explains. "But we built it as high as we possibly could. It's part of the reason that it has a squatter kind of doughnut shape, like a tokamak generator shape.

"We tried a sphere in here that was the circumference of the space, horizontally, but it just broke through the floor and the ceiling of the stage. We didn't want to have to create lots of visual effects from the top or below. So we squished it down to create this kind of elongated shape, which has worked out really well because it's more cinematic than if it was just a vertical."

If you think about how you're viewing the TARDIS at home, that's the "missing" wall of the dome. Opposite that is a huge, raised viewing platform to allow for filming.

The view looking in, and the way out.

The set is on two floors but technically there are three tiers – the ground floor, the first floor where the console sits, and then second floors accessible via ramps.

"Russell's set description for the first time we walked in was, 'It's the first time we walk into the TARDIS and it's a huge spherical cavernous space,' words to that effect – I'm paraphrasing, although they should be welded into my mind, the amount I read it.

"We started playing with models and illustrations. We were going along a different tack where we got lots of triangular panels with roundels interlinked in the old hexagonal arrangement of roundels. Russell and Phil [Collinson, producer] both thought it wasn't big enough and airy enough and there wasn't the scale. I'd done another sketch, which I presented at the end of the document, because I'd already got the feeling that if the airiness was what they wanted, then we needed to go even bigger.

"I did this sketch, which was more or less what we've got here, and they loved it. And I immediately wished I had not put the sketch in the document," he laughs, "because I didn't know *how* we were going to make it.

"I think, in hindsight, it deserved it. It deserved that chance to just be as big and as bonkers as we could think it could be. But I

JAMES PARDON/BBC STUDIOS

> **“We illustrated lots of different versions of the console... lots”**

Light colour and brightness is completely customisable.

sort of did a double-take and realised what I’ve drawn – ‘My god, how are we gonna build it?’”

Sims says the process for coming up with the new TARDIS console involved “researching hard all consoles that have come before”, something he explains was also handy for the Remembered version, as seen recently in *Tales Of The TARDIS*.

One thing he notes about the original consoles is that although fine in their original habitats, they just wouldn’t cut it in a set this size. “So we looked at that in renders and illustrations and a VR environment and realised that it was too small. I think Phil flagged it first, and said, ‘We should look to a bigger console’, which we did. We illustrated lots of different versions, *lots* of different versions, and finally landed on this.”

Sims tells *SFX* that each of the metal panels inset here with levers and buttons measures the size of one side of the William Hartnell console – meaning six of those would have made up the original Peter Brachacki design, showing just how much bigger this one is.

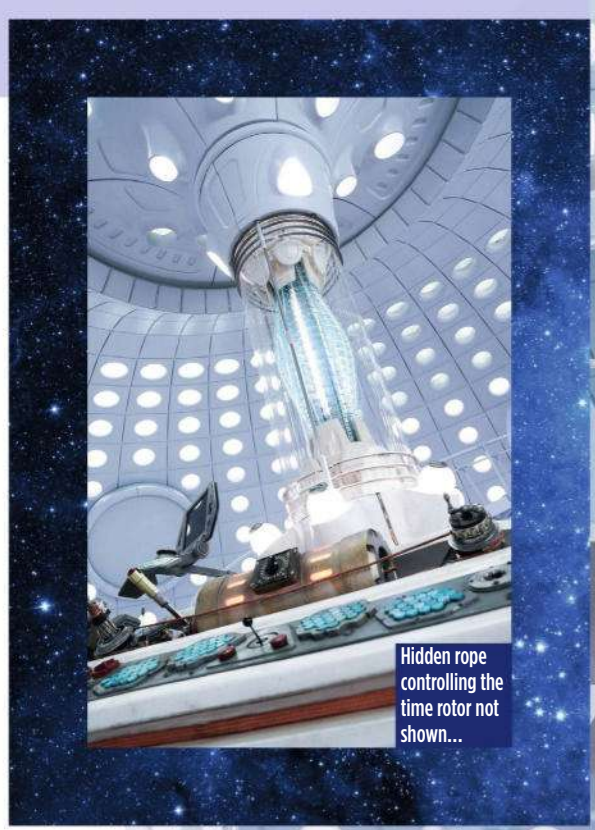
“Then we drew even more versions of the time rotor to try to get a design, which was emotional, but we got there as well.” He explains the workings: “The central section, you see these spades or paddles, they’re the petals. There’s some set at the bottom and set at the top. So when the time rotor moves up, which is the column in between, inside of the petals the time rotor moves up and down. And as it moves up the petals at the bottom open, and then the ones at the top close, and then on the opposite side, they open and close alternately, as it moves up and down.”

All achieved through the wonders of modern television? Er, not quite. “There’s a rope attached at the top of it to a pulley that leads over there to that [viewing] platform, and whoever’s our art department assistant at the time has the joy. They sit and operate the rope that moves the console up and down. One of the requirements was that it was as quiet as →

possible, because I think historically, because the TARDIS has been a bit smaller, and you've got some movement in the console, there's a constant noise of motors or pulleys or squeaks and whatever. So that was one of the first things I was terrorised with."

We spot a sonic socket, *that* coffee machine plus a tribute to a lost colleague, Charles Edwards, that reads: "This Type 40 Time Capsule has been approved for use by Chief Stellar Engineer Charles Edwards of the Gallifrey TARDIS Shipyard".

Then there's lots of Gallifreyan typography, which Sims says they've updated somewhat. "We've tweaked them to make them feel maybe more ancient and substantial. Some of the Gallifreyan is really delicate and sort of filigree, and it just wouldn't read on the scale of something like this. So that's why we've created a slightly different [version] – it's the same symbology, but it's slightly bolder.



Hidden rope controlling the time rotor not shown...

"The music's been a recurring thing, we've used the jukebox quite a lot"

"We did nominate a navigation section and an engine section and coffee section. But what tends to happen is there's a natural way of filming – you want to film towards the door and away from the door to get reverses. So this panel is used a lot, and also it's got the big levers on it, and Ncuti really gives the levers everything. I think we need to reinforce and repair that console at the end of it, actually."

He looks down at his creation. "There's a split in this... this lever gets used a lot. You can see a crack in the TARDIS where he really gives it some welly, so I think we've got to take this off and probably put a metal sheet in there!"

Speaking of cracks – a familiar design motif returns, which you probably noticed on the Fourteenth Doctor's sonic.

"The cracked finish is raku pottery. It was just something Russell was fond of from his previous incarnation of the TARDIS where there was a very cracked patina on the console. He wanted to keep that raku for a big ceramic piece, which I thought was great with a big engineered ceramic console."

There's also a jukebox on the set, which viewers will have spotted in "The Giggle." It's a working retro Wurlitzer that the production team purchased. When it's quiet on set, we can hear the liquid inside bubbling away.

Some of the songs listed on the jukebox include: John Smith and The Common Men's "Twist At The End", Soft Cell's "Tainted Love", Britney Spears's "Toxic", Rogue Traders' "Voodoo Child" and tracks by Rick Astley, Spice Girls and David Bowie. There's also Pat Hodges's "I Called Out Your Name (In A Dream)" (as heard in the 1996 TV movie). Maybe best not play that one, eh?

Some of the controls that Ncuti chucks around.

"The idea is that the Wurlitzer is the hatstand of Tom Baker's TARDIS, so it's where there's been a very carefully chosen bit of furniture or ephemera. Russell asked for it. He thought about it. We talked about hatstands, we talked about all sorts of things. We tried different chairs, wingback chairs, all sorts of different chairs or sofas or bits and pieces. There's no hatstand – the hatstand didn't make the cut. But the jukebox did. I don't know how far ahead he was thinking. But the music's been a recurring thing, we've used the jukebox quite a lot. Music has been really important in this series, certainly since Ncuti's been the Doctor.

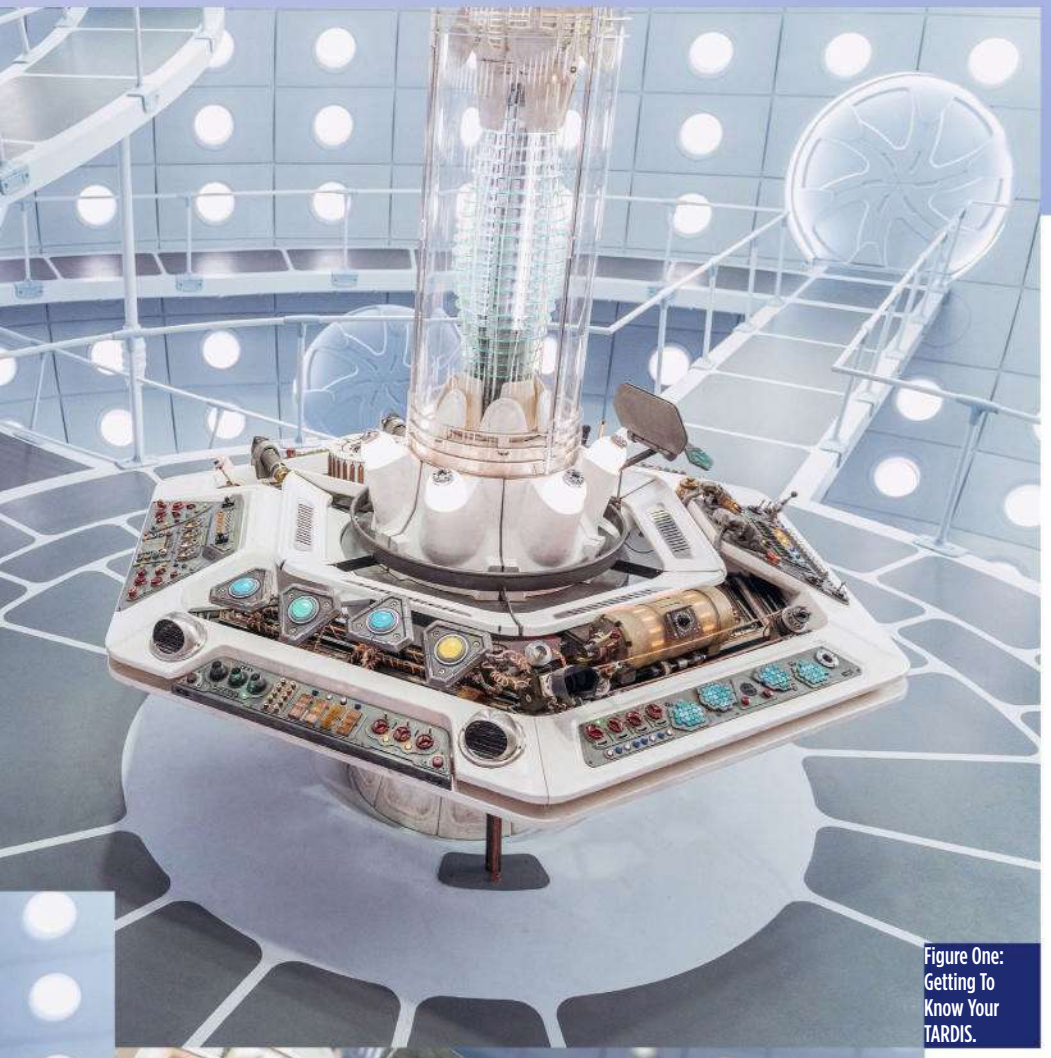


Figure One: Getting To Know Your TARDIS.

Displays like this are done in-camera now.

"I think they've all been chosen very carefully. There are some that are deliberately there for the plot," he hints.

The other point of change about this new TARDIS, jukebox aside, is the lighting, Sims adds. "The lighting state is something that gets considered and it's something Russell's become more passionate about and engaged with.

"Whenever a director is on, one of the questions Russell asks is, you've got to think about your lighting for the TARDIS and you've got to think about your colour for the TARDIS because he wants them to explore it, but also creating an ambience that's right for the story for the Doctor. What they can do with the lighting is almost infinite, really. They've programmed it to do all sorts of craziness already."

Sims says this new set is "more flexible. At least two directors have said it just sort of shoots itself. They can put the camera anywhere and it looks great. In the last couple of blocks, [the] camera platform has been established, which has helped. Because of the nature of the walkways, there can be a bit of movement in it when people are walking if you're moving a dolly, so we can arm a crane in if we don't want to have dollies on here. But the point is we can have a dolly anywhere in the set or crane from below, we can arm in off the platform. We've had drones in here filming the set, and all sorts of craziness.

"We've kind of intimated that maybe there's other spaces or rooms or corridors in the TARDIS you might go off to," Sims says of the circular doors around the set, explaining that they're "like a camera iris when it opens." They currently "open" via visual effects, but he says, "One of the things I want to do in season two is have an irising door so we can move it around and use it wherever we want to."

ROOM FOR ONE MORE?

On the wall at the base of the set, a sign notes "TARDIS WEIGHTS UNIT GUIDE", advising that 10 people can be on the central console at any one time – or dolly and equipment and operator and six additional people. So now you know.

VFXCITING

Eagle-eyed viewers will have noticed what looks like a scanner screen, high up on the wall. "The way we filmed it so far is greenscreen. It's not even greenscreen in fact, it would be rotoscoped because it's quite complicated putting the greenscreen in and out of it. Now we are looking at engineering specific screens that we put in there so we can play content through.

"Something we've done through this show a lot, even with a lot of handheld tablets in the latest block, is we've played a lot of content in-camera, because it just looks authentic. We can concentrate our VFX money on things that are really exciting, rather than just putting screens in where we have shots of screens."

Sims beams with pride and pulls a lever.

"I think my favourite console is this one. Because I wanted it to feel engineered and have a sci-fi authenticity that I feel that the Tom Baker/Jon Pertwee period had. I felt like you could walk out of that TARDIS into any sci-fi show – you could turn up in *Battlestar Galactica* or *Buck Rogers* and you wouldn't bat an eyelid.

"Recently that sort of tone of the show has changed. So in some respects, it's harder to believe that, but it's more understandable that you'd walk out of it into another different kind of fantasy space. So that was the plan – the TARDIS has always had engineered parts and handles and levers, but to have a more sci-fi aesthetic."

The journey's only just begun...

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

PHIL SIMS TALKS HOW THE *DOCTOR WHO* TEAM BROUGHT THE MEEP AND WRARTH TO LIFE

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

Digital concept art for the first reveal of the Meep.

WOLF STUDIOS, Cardiff. They should just rent us a room, really. The one we're in today is jokingly referred to as "the Meeping Room" as it's filled with concept art from the first two specials, as well as props and costumes including the full-size Jimbo robot. It's pre-transmission; we have no idea what it is, but we *are* slightly alarmed at a painting of Donna blowing up...

Today we're continuing our tour with production designer Phil Sims, who's showing us a foam Meep head, almost like a half-mask, with no fur, like a Siamese cat. The finished Meep is, obviously, bigger for full face and animatronics. Beside it are a rubbery latex shoe/foot and gloves with very long fingers.

Coming face to face with the Meep, you see it has very reflective glass eyes and is very nice to touch. Yes, of course we stroked the Meep. Who wouldn't?

THE MEEP

"We created loads of different silhouettes for the Meep and ideas and in the end, Russell was clear he wanted it to be pretty evocative of the comic," Sims says. "So we reverted back to this [look], which isn't exactly like Dave Gibbons's drawing, but it's much closer, certainly, than a lot of the other ideas were. This became the hero [look] that we harked back to."

One design has the Meep looking like the Cheshire Cat from *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland*, which Sims notes is "too happy."

"Once we established we weren't going to be doing fully CG creatures, we created a 3D digital concept of the Meep in-house and then worked with Neill Gorton from Millennium FX, who has a great history with the show.

"Neill's guys then started processing [that] to illustrate the size, so we could work out how big the Meep needed to be. Even in the comic, it looks like it bounces around a little bit in size, but he's kind of table height.

"We created lots of maquettes, literally stood cardboard cut-outs in the meeting room for everybody to look at and decided on the size. Neill then fleshed out a 3D prototype of the head so we could talk about how we tried to get performance out of the Meep, and how much performance we needed. This wouldn't really fit on someone's head, but there's a place there for the bridge of your nose, so it literally sits like a mask and your mouth's free underneath.

"Once we'd scaled the Meep down to a size that we could agree on, then we had to work through how we fit it around a person. The point we took away was that we should make sure the person's head is completely covered. They're completely in character.

"We didn't want to do jaw removal, or wrap them in Lycra or anything like that to be removed in post. We wanted to try a process where we got as much in-camera as we can, with a view that once it's in an edit, we then look at the shots and see how much work needs to be done in post production, if any, to

Rose's toys became less obvious over time.

enhance more, or it works fine as it is." Sims says that discussions about feet and fur followed, with Neill working on a sculpt fitting a dancer he'd previously collaborated with.

"She was tiny and able to maintain that crouch position that we needed to make somebody that size. So he built the sculpt around her and then resized the head. He also needed to allow space in it for animatronics. The mouth could move, the ears moved. I think the eyes moved, the jaw moved and it wrinkled its nose up in a cute way.

"When it becomes naughty Meep, we needed a much different look. That required a different sculpt, because we couldn't build all the animatronics into the head to allow the amount of expression we needed for when he was in evil mode – compared to when he was in cute kind of Gremlin mode at the start.

"So there was another face that was modelled alongside that, where his teeth are bared and he's got a much angrier expression, his eyes are narrowed and his ears have the

Cue the Meep's true colours...

The Meep has its own stylists.

One's brows must be on point.

There's a tiny dancer in there!

"When it becomes naughty Meep, we needed a different look and different sculpt"

ability to move back. So he's got that expression of a cat where he can hiss at people. We knew at that point we obviously needed visual effects help to do that transition.

"Basically, we shot the Meep shuffling around on haunches, and in and out of taxis and all sorts of stuff. So as real as we could, and as much of it in-camera as we could."

Sims says they filmed part of the Meep's first scene in an alleyway at the back of Roath Lock, while other elements were produced on stage four. He also reveals that "Russell didn't want it to be too obvious and on the nose" which aliens Rose's toys were based on; original concept art shows they were intended to be more recognisable. "So they became more abstract."

Of the Meep's throne, Sims says: "We created that out of bent, curved steel girders. In fact, Phil [Collinson, producer] asked if he can have the throne in his office, which would be really appropriate."

Sims notes that there "wasn't a big enough footprint in the steelworks" to have the spaceship crash-land on its side as in the comic. "We wanted it to be huge and imposing. It gives an opportunity for lots of vertical shots, looking up through the steelworks through the roof, which was great. And it meant we could illustrate the dagger drive."

Originally one of the plans was to have a more organic spaceship for the Meep. →

CONCEPT ART BY PAINTING PRACTICE

Striking concept art for the Wrarth Warriors.

Describing it as "alien-looking", Sims says, "It was meant to look like it could be the belly or the insides of the ship. The idea was too organic and a bit too disturbing. So we [went] with one of the other references, which was more in line with [1997 film] *Event Horizon*, more riveted, and also in keeping with the idea of a 1950/'60s American jet – polished, beaten aluminium plates.

"Russell wanted tons of lights and buttons all over it. So we came up with the idea that maybe there were lots of Meeps once upon a time, and they would have inhabited this in numbers rather than just the one Meep. And in space, they'd have bounced around the consoles and they would have burnished it and polished it because they're furry.

"The idea was they could get to any of it once it's in space," he continues. "But parts of it were quite inaccessible when it's on the ground. Then it's scripted that we need lots of buttons pressed, and levers pulled, to help circumvent disaster."

WRARTH WARRIORS

"With the Wrarth, we explored lots of different shapes and ideas. We understood they were kind of beetle-y and carapaced, but played with that and tried to bring them into a more earthly realistic world. Again, Russell really wanted to hark back to the comic. So this Wrarth is more faithful to the comic, I think, than the Meep is, even down to the hooved feet and the odd hammer-like gun gadget it's got in its right tentacle.

"The tricky thing with the Wrarth was, per the comic, the arms and legs are quite insect-like in proportion. We created quite a wide pelvis based on the comic, which isn't great if you're trying to perform inside of it. The legs needed stilts because they're so extended. So it was quite a complicated rig and we ended up with people the height of basketballers cast, so there was a natural height to them. Russell wanted them to tower when they were inside the house, so apart from having to make sure the kitchen where we see the Wrarth was high enough to accommodate them, the actors were huge before they were on stilts. So then when they're on stilts, they're absolutely *enormous* and it's complicated walking about in stilts with a mask on.

"We created a ZBrush [digital sculpting package] model of them for the illustrations. So we've got a basic shape, but then obviously it needed to be rationalised onto a human form. So there Neill takes that off us. That took a couple of weeks, three weeks maybe, to backwards and forwards it to the execs to approve it and make

Digitally sculpted designs used for reference.

The Wrarth actors were basketballer-sized.

Most of the effects were done practically.

“This Wrarth is more faithful to the comic, I think, than the Meep is, even down to the feet”

sure everyone’s happy, look at scale printouts of it that we create to see that the height is right – all that kind of thing. So from start to finish, it was something like 12 weeks.

“The CG elements of that, again, there were lots of discussions about that – should we/could we enhance it? They’ve had a bit of help in their movement and stabilisation, because sometimes the actors did find it difficult to stand. The main planned work was the legs because sometimes, if the Wrarth needed to move quickly, they couldn’t run on stilts, so they needed to have green legs.

“They would move more ably on their feet with green Lycra shins from the knee down. But other than that the plan wasn’t to do a huge amount of CG to the Wrarth.”

Sims said they made three Wrarth in total, comprising around 12 to 14 pieces per outfit. *SFX* looks at a prototype of a Wrarth gun, which Sims says “feels deceptively light because we printed it in a foam material”.

This was due to the arms being “quite long. It’s physics, but the further away from a joint or a pivot something gets, the heavier it seems to be, so we needed to try and make it as lightweight as we could.

“Also we needed to create weapons that were sympathetic to the design of the Wrarth, so the idea was that [the] holes were there to fit the tentacle fingers through, so they wrapped around the ball. So it wasn’t a conventional handgun where there’s a stock and a finger trigger – they maybe had multiple triggers and they contact this sphere and that’s how they operate.

“They lit up – we had LEDs and things like that in them – and then you’ve got to feed battery packs and wires through, so that’s another weight. You’re constantly aware of how much you’re putting on these actors.”

Wrarths even get their own clapperboard. Fancy.

Robert Strange: study well, cosplayers...

A BUG'S LIFE

ROBERT STRANGE TALKS ABOUT BRINGING THE WRARTH TO LIFE

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

Were you familiar with *Doctor Who*?
I've always been a fan. I remember watching the Christopher Eccleston series when I was young. David Tennant and Catherine Tate were my childhood heroes. To be involved in their reunion was something special; to see them in real life on set, doing their back and forth the way that they do.

How did the role come your way?
Because I carved a niche for myself as a creature performer, a lot of work comes to me directly based on what I've done in the past and what they're looking for physically. I'm lucky enough to have worked a lot over the years with Millennium FX, who make *Doctor Who*'s creature suits. They got in touch and said, "We need a tall performer who's willing to do something quite physical". So I went to the workshop. There was a pair of giant stilts lying on the floor. They unofficially told me what it was for. I didn't need any convincing whatsoever – I said, "Let's do it!"

How well did you take to the stilts?
Quite well. They're almost like a giant pair of heels, just on a tiptoe with a counterbalance down the back. They're quite agile. You can't stand still in those specific type of stilts. They have a curved base on the foot which allows you to move forwards and you have to constantly shift your weight to stand on the spot. So we incorporated that into the movement of the Wrarth – they have this lumbering, insect-y quality.

Tell us about being fitted in the costume...
It took an hour and a half to get ready. We had a balaclava-esque head with the big glowing eyes and antennae, and the exoskeleton of the insect-like head was a pull-on thing over our head and neck. And then the face was stuck on our face – we could look out through holes. That was the only bit that was glued on, blended in and painted. The rest was a suit that you put on in various layers.

The incredible people from Millennium who made the suit dressed you and looked after you all day, with water bottles and fans to cool you down. They even made huge bicycle seats on a big stand that they could run in between takes, so when we couldn't take the stilts off, we'd at least have something to sit on. Vital when you're marching up and down a street in Cardiff for several hours!

This was the Wrarth Warriors' signature battle scene...
In terms of spectacle, it was really fun. Primarily for the shoot there were two of us, Stephen Love and myself. But for those shots there were four of us, Jordan Benjamin and Vassili Psaltopoulos as well. We had earpieces in so that Paul Kasey, who's the creature

PICTURES BY ROBERT STRANGE AND ALISTAIR HEAP

"What did you do at work today, hon?" "Well..."

The Wrarth doing their thing in "The Star Beast".

movement director, could keep us marching on time. We brought all the movement together, with the twitches of the head and the claw going, while trying to see with peripheral vision. Then around you, you've got all these incredible stunt performers who are firing rubber bullets. I think most of the residents had left so that they could film overnight, but a few had chosen to stay – so there were some people looking out of their windows at all this going on. It must have been so surreal.

◆ Tell us about filming the scene in the car park.

That was great fun. There was a lot of dialogue which we did on the day in the stilts with the mask on. It was one of the most challenging performances I've done because you're trying to balance – you can't stay still, but you've got to stay on your mark for close-ups. You can't see, you have no peripheral vision, and obviously you're very hot and sweaty and tired.

We had a voice in our ear telling us to keep up the movement, and you're also trying to do the dialogue. So there was a lot going on. But I thrive on that. It takes the fear of overthinking away when you have a lot of things happening.

◆ What were David and Catherine like to work with?

They were so friendly. When sat waiting between takes you'd turn your head and realise that one of them was there looking at the suit, taking in the detail. After 15 years they just had that excitement again, seeing this brand new creature that's in front of them. They were so excited to be back, you could feel it. They had this amazing chemistry; I learnt a lot just by watching and listening to them perform. Their fearlessness physically as well. They're such incredible physical performers, which sounds unusual because they're not in creature suits, but they really are. If you watch them in the show they're so in their bodies when they perform. It was a real treat to be a part of their reunion.

> **"You can't see, you have no peripheral vision, and you're very hot and sweaty"**

◆ How do you look back on your first experience in the Whoniverse?

It was unforgettable. It was sweaty – definitely a leg workout! I'm lucky enough to have been involved in some amazing franchises, film with some incredible people and be involved in worlds that meant such a huge deal to me as a kid. So to add another one, I still really can't believe it. There's something magic going on with this revival of *Doctor Who*, the new energy behind it and the response to it.

Contouring can only go so far, unfortunately.

TOYROOM

BOYS AND GIRLS COME OUT TO PLAY... ONCE DOCTOR WHO HAS SAVED THE DAY!

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

FROM CDS AND BOOKS, TO ACTION figures and spatulas, there's been a constant flow of *Doctor Who* products into the nation's shops since the show's earliest days. Some have enjoyed more of an afterlife than others. Over the following pages, *SFX* joins collector and merchandise expert Chris Hill (previously featured in issue 366) in a look back at some of the series' most bizarre, unusual and plain Dalektable tie-ins. From a gadget capable of causing serious bodily injury to a figure-less action figure, there's something for everyone in our toybox.

DALEK PLAYSUIT (1964)

If you found a Dalek Playsuit in your Christmas stocking, your parents can't have been short of a few shillings. "At £8 15s 6d, it was incredibly expensive for the time," says Hill.

Unfortunately, months after going on sale, manufacturer Scorpion Automotives' production machinery was destroyed in a factory fire and, unable to recover from the loss, they went out of business.

Only a dozen Playsuits are known to exist today – and four of them have passed through Hill's hands. Detaching the best parts from each, he's crafted his own Frankenstein's monster of a, well, monster. And it's in frighteningly good condition. "I have it on display," he says. "It's on a frame in my *Doctor Who* room so it looks like someone's wearing it!"

Those looking to live their best Dalek life will need a short stature as well as deep pockets. One of these bad boys – a Holy Grail for collectors – will set you back a staggering £4,000–£5,000. Double that if you can find the original TARDIS-style box.

DOCTOR WHO AND THE DALEKS CUTTA-MASTIC (1965)

Kids banished to their bedrooms in the mid-'60s may have tried a daring escape in the fashion of the Daleks in their very first television adventure – using the Cutta-mastic to sear a hole around the door.

The toy's *intended* use? A battery-operated, red-hot wire enabled line-drawn Daleks printed on sheets of polystyrene to be cut out and stuck onto a mountain landscape illustration. "It was a great way to burn the house down on Christmas Day," laughs Hill. But with a value of around £500, the only thing it'll burn a hole through these days is a collector's wallet.

FIRST DOCTOR JIGSAW (1965)

The vast majority of *Doctor Who* merchandise released in the '60s was Dalek-related, so Thomas Hope & Sankey Hudson's jigsaw featuring the image of William Hartnell's First Doctor was incredibly unusual. Unfortunately, of the four jigsaws released by the company, this was the one to be withdrawn.

"It showed the Doctor and one of his companions – presumably supposed to be Susan, though there was no resemblance – inside the TARDIS, with the doors open and a Dalek outside ready to shoot," Hill notes. "The BBC wanted the TARDIS to be considered a safe place, so they issued another to replace it, minus the illustration of Hartnell."

Complete in its box, Hill predicts the now ultra-rare puzzle will fetch £400-500.

TREASURES

MENOPTERA AND ZARBI BADGES (1965)

After releasing two successful Dalek badges, Plastoid unleashed the Zarbi and Menoptera – alien insectoids from season two oddity "The Web Planet". But even the Menoptera's four large wings couldn't help the badge fly from shop shelves. "I mean, it basically looks like a butterfly," Hill laughs. "At least the Zarbi badge *looks* like a bit of a monster. It's not surprising they didn't sell well. The set of four that I have on their backing cards are the only set known to exist in that form."

The Zarbi would sell for upwards of £400-500 today. "The Menoptera badge would probably be more in the £600 range," says Hill, "if they show up at all."

DALEK NURSERY TOY (1965)

Given its detachable eye stalk, arm and gun stick, health and safety bodies wouldn't hesitate to exterminate Selcol's 12-inch, polythene Dalek Nursery Toy. As Hill says, "You gave it to a small child to hold – and hope the bits didn't come off!"

The potentially deadly doll is worth around £250 today. At that price, you probably won't be giving it to the kids anyway.

FOURTH DOCTOR UNDERPANTS (1980)

Let's not beat about the bush: department store chain BHS's Tom Baker underpants have acquired almost mythical status among fans. "And I don't understand why," says Hill. "There wasn't much *Doctor Who* clothing in the '70s and '80s, so perhaps that makes underpants unusual? But by comparison – look at the David Tennant and Matt Smith years. How many pairs of underpants do *their* faces appear on? Probably dozens!"

The polyester pants – marketed for the show's core audience, 10-year-old boys – lurk somewhere in Hill's collection. "They're unused," he clarifies.

As used and worn underwear usually ends up in the bin, Tom's pair are a pretty rare sighting these days. And with a projected value of £250, they're certainly not to be sniffed at.

A shop display banner for the Sky Ray offer

WALL'S SKY RAY WRAPPER (1967)

Doctor Who fans' mouths probably weren't watering all the way to the ice cream van for the raspberry and orange flavour lolly, but the collectable picture card tucked inside each paper wrapper which, when placed into the tie-in album *Dr Who's Space Adventure Book*, told an exciting Dalek invasion story.

"The cards and album are reasonably easy to find," says Hill. "As for the wrappers; apart from mine, I've only seen one other."

Does he believe any more might be out there? "Maybe there's another in a scrapbook in somebody's attic!"

Sixties kids get rummaging, because according to Hill, a Sky Ray wrapper will fetch a cool £1,000 today. "It's one of those things that's so rare that it would get the interest of the serious collectors."

DR WHO SUPERHERO COSTUME AND MASK (1976)

Berwick's Fourth Doctor dress-up kit was only ever available in America. It contained an apron decorated with his iconic ensemble of scarf, waistcoat and jacket, plus a plastic face mask.

"As a Halloween costume it's pretty darn creepy," Hill says. "It's this blank, plastic face. If all you were to see was the face, I'm not sure you'd pick it out and say it's the Doctor. But with the rest of the costume, it's obvious."

The kit is so rare – only around 300 were ever sold – that Hill has not seen one up for sale in over four decades as a collector. So, how much would it sell for if it were to pop up on eBay? "I bet in the upper hundreds of pounds. It might even break £1,000."

"FULL CIRCLE" VIEW-MASTER REELS (1981)

Over a decade before "Dimensions In Time" pickled the Doctors in 360-degree nostalgia, the popular View-Master stereoscopic toy offered *Doctor Who* fans their first experience of the show in 3D. Holding the toy up to their eyes with one of three disks slotted in place, they could revisit the previous year's adventure "Full Circle" across 21 eye-popping colour photographs. Short captions summarised key scenes, including the classic moment where "Citizen men are harvesting riverfruits".

The "Full Circle" reel can be purchased for around £30 today. A second reel recounting Peter Davison's debut story "Castrovalva" followed in 1982.

TARDIS PLAYHOUSE (1982)

The Tardis Playhouse offered two roleplaying scenarios. Misbehaving children might use its telephone to report their parents to the police for sending them to bed early or, much more excitingly, they could travel to distant galaxies, fight monsters and save alien civilisations!

An illustration of the TARDIS console was printed on the back wall of the tent. Above it, a clear window allowed parents to check in on their time tots. But it's the image on the outer box that holds particular charm. Three children cosplayed the Fifth Doctor and his two companions, Australian air hostess Tegan and Nyssa of Traken – the latter modelling a non-canonical over-shoulder hand muff. Well, it's cold in space!

"It's tough to find the Playhouse in good condition," notes Chris, "but boxed and in mint condition, it would probably fetch £300-400."

FIFTH DOCTOR EASTER EGG (1982)

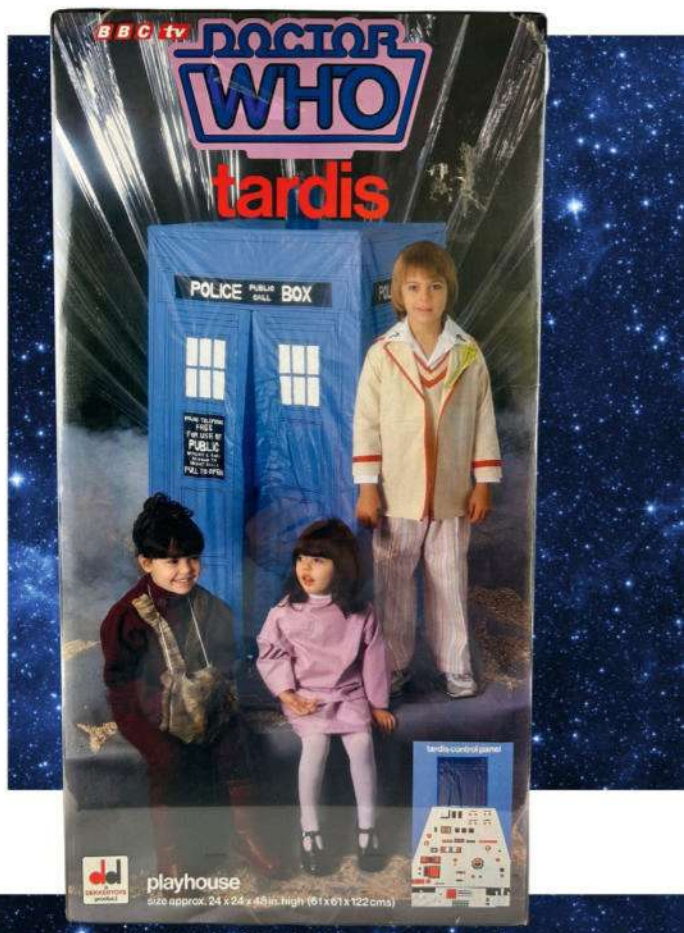
It's the Egg's seemingly innocuous packaging that's to blame for the annual Easter-time memes popping up on social media.

"Either somebody was very clever in their design philosophy or was completely checked out when they did it," laughs Hill. "You have this great picture of Peter Davison that's revealed when you open the TARDIS door, but then the Dalek's death ray on the outside of the box appears to come directly from his crotch. It's become a little bit of an iconic item for that reason."

Hill had the opportunity to share in the joy with Davison's *Doctor Who* co-star, Janet Fielding (Tegan). "She had a great time," he laughs. "She recorded a little video to show to Peter. She opens the door and closes the door and makes inappropriate commentary. I'm sure she ribbed him about it."

A collector would expect to pay around £50 for the box. But everyone knows it's what's on the inside that counts and amazingly, Hill's egg has survived 41 Easters – and if he resists a bite this anniversary season, nine Doctors.

"It's still wrapped in green foil so it's hard to know what the chocolate looks like," Hill says, "but it still smells vaguely of chocolate. After all these years!"



DAPOL ACTION FIGURES (1988/1990)

Welsh toy manufacturer Dapol celebrated *Doctor Who*'s 25th anniversary – and their arrival onto the collectables scene – with a playset containing a green-tinted K9 and a five-sided (rather than six) TARDIS console.

"Dapol blamed the errors on the photos they were given," Hill says. "The BBC approved them but subsequently producer John Nathan-Turner said, 'This is no good, you'll need to change it.'"

The BBC and Dapol struck a deal. Once 10,000 playsets had sold, the affected figures would be replaced. In the event only 1,200 sold, so a corrected set never materialised.

In 1990, meanwhile, Dapol performed a medical miracle on Dalek creator Davros. "The founder of Dapol said, 'Why would anyone want to buy a toy with just one hand? They're going to think it's broken.' So, they consciously made Davros with two hands. It was only when Nathan-Turner complained that they said, 'We can easily fix that – we'll just cut half the arm off.' Which is what they did. Literally."

The playset sells for £100-200 now, and a two-handed Davros is a steal at less than £30.

DRESS-UP OUTFITS (2008)

Back when half of the United Kingdom was tuning into *Doctor Who* and only one Doctor looked like actor David Tennant, a range of full-body dress-up kits from Christys' by Design offered children the option to masquerade as the Doctor or, more temptingly, one of his foes.

"Halloween is enough of a thing in this country now for people to have bought costumes," says Hill. "Perhaps *Doctor Who* was a welcome relief from the usual ghosts and ghouls."

The Tenth Doctor kit contained a wig, a suit, and a slip of material worn over shoes that resembled his Converse. As for the monsters, the Slitheen came complete with a compression-field collar, while the Ood included a translation sphere which could be held for full effect. There was also a Judoon, Dalek and a Cyberman. And with all six costumes scaled down in size for five- to eight-year-olds, from an adult's perspective they're rather delightful.

DESTROYED CASSANDRA ACTION FIGURE (2006)

When the Doctor met Lady Cassandra O'Brien in series one adventure "The End Of The World", she'd had so many nips that her body had been reduced to a piece of stretched skin across a metal frame – her brain tucked away in a jar.

The following year, at the climax of series two's "New Earth", Cassandra burst from lack of moisture, leaving her frame standing empty. Having included Cassandra in its first wave of toys, action figure manufacturer Character Options took inspiration from her demise and re-released the frame as a variant product.

"This definitely feels like scraping the bottom of the barrel," Hill laughs. "I don't understand the play value at all. I can't imagine that your nan goes into a toy shop to buy you a Christmas present, and she's going to pick Destroyed Cassandra. So you're selling it primarily because you know there are fans out there who are going to buy anything. Isn't that a little bit exploitative?"

You'll find plenty of Destroyed Cassandras on eBay for under a tenner – some of them accompanied by her companion, Chip. Collect them all!

DESIGNING A GHOST STORY FOR CHRISTMAS

HOW THE TERRIFYING MUMMY IN *LOT NO 249* WAS BROUGHT (BACK) TO LIFE

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT** IMAGES: **MATTHEW THOMAS / COLIN HUTTON / DAVE & LOU ELSEY**

Concept art for the mummy, drawn by Dave Elsey.

THEY'VE WORKED with legendary filmmakers and created characters for a slew of iconic properties – but Lou and Dave Elsey from Igor Studios would "do *Ghost Story* forever" if they could, despite the annual tales from Mark Gatiss being created on a fraction of Hollywood budgets.

***SFX* goes behind the scenes on the filming of *A Ghost Story For Christmas: Lot No 249* with the creature makers to see how they bring the dead to life...**

OPEN THE CASKET

DAVE: We had a very, very short amount of time to think about this. The first thing to do was to research all the different mummies from all the films that have been done before. We didn't really want to go down exactly the same route that every other one has gone down.

Of course, we're already familiar with lots of them, being horror movie fans. We looked at everything – the Boris Karloff mummy, the Christopher Lee mummy from the Hammer version. There's even mummies in Abbott and Costello movies that we looked at. Obviously there's a theme with all of them. But we also looked at some of the illustrations and things that had been done. Then we set about doing designs of our own, which featured certain aspects that we hadn't really seen that much in other mummy films.

LOU: There were also photos and references of real mummies that we discussed with Mark that he liked the look of – he sent us a lot of stuff, we sent him a lot of stuff. He liked the leathery skin – it was trying to put a mix of all of these different ideas into this one character.

DAVE: We sent him maybe 10 or 11 designs.

LOU: They were all quite broad, very different styles.

DAVE: Mark literally chose the bits of the mummies that we had done that he liked and then we incorporated them into the finished design. We had great guidelines in that Conan Doyle [author of the original story] is very descriptive of what he wanted, and Mark obviously wanted it to follow the description as much as possible.

MAN BEHIND THE MUMMY

DAVE: One of the great things about this was that we got to work with James Swanton. He just has the greatest face; he can do incredible expressions; he's very, very good.
LOU: We had a great foundation building on a good actor, who was the perfect canvas for this character we were creating.
DAVE: Once we knew it was him, we started working on castings of his face and hands and a body cast as well, to work out how to create in three dimensions what we had designed in two dimensions. We sculpted appliances for his face which we moulded, and then created rubber appliances out of those that could work.

Actor James Swanton: he's a lovely chap really.

BACK TO BASICS

DAVE: There was very, very little time to build anything. So I went back to some degree to some of the earlier versions of how mummies were constructed for other films. In particular, I looked at what Roy Ashton had done on the Hammer version of the mummy, on Christopher Lee, where he had manufactured parts of it more or less as a mask, really.

I wanted to have really dead-looking eyes, really expressionless. So we created a headpiece, that was made really simply – there was no mould-making, it was literally constructed on his life-cast and latex and cotton wool to get that mummy-like texture of the skin. That was made as one piece – we had this skullcap which includes his cheekbones and his eyes, and that could be reused every single day. So then we were really only having to replace the lower part of his face with more flexible, more traditional appliances and sculpting those.

Normally what would happen is that you would sculpt all the pieces in clay, texture them and then mould them. Whilst we did sculpt them, we then wanted to tie it all together with that desiccated mummy look – those textures that were already established on the top of this skullcap. So then we got tissue paper and acrylic medium, placed the tissue paper over the wrinkles and the sculptures that we had made, and then we put acrylic medium on top of that, just to wet it. What happens to the tissue paper is that it immediately starts to wrinkle and go into these very, very tight little wrinkles and have this very particular mummy look, that would be really, really hard to sculpt and would be very, very time consuming. But we just got that for free by doing this technique.

LOU: It was really only about two and a half weeks that we had to do the whole thing – maybe three weeks from when we first started designing. So it was trying to think of quick and simple solutions to create the design that we wanted without compromising any of the quality. There was a lot of lateral thinking – how can we do it quickly and efficiently, while still keeping the quality to the standard that we want, and still make a cool mummy?

The special ingredient for dyeing? Tea. Lots of tea.

The neckpiece which introduces a bit of colour.

BODYSHOP

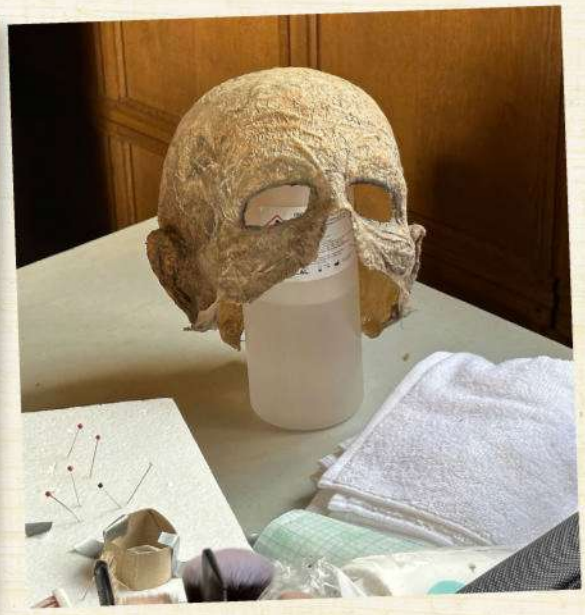
LOU: There were a lot of images with jewellery in the designs, which we really loved because a lot of them were buried with all of their jewels, but we've never really seen that in any mummy film or any mummies – where it almost became part of their body and moulded into their skin and was wrapped around with the bandages. So we went ahead with that idea.

I wanted to do everything so that it was efficient, so we made a bodysuit out of Lycra and then sculpted some of the forms of the body. We did a ribcage and hip bones, and then started to work on the wrapping of the bandages, which were all hand-dyed and then placed on one by one to get the aesthetic we wanted.

LOU: Because the whole suit was all built on a Lycra bodysuit with just a big zip up the back, he could move, he was really comfortable, he could use the bathroom and all that sort of stuff, all the practical things that you need when you're shooting.

I made a neck piece that came right up to the edge of James's jawline, and then right the way down into his collarbone. It was quite sculptural, but it also added colour to what we were doing so it wasn't just that everything was muddy, dirty and dusty. It added a little bit of extra detail.

DAVE: Dyeing all of the fabric was really fun. We literally had a giant bucket of builder's tea that we dipped everything in. That was the perfect thing to dye all the bandages and get stains in them.



Essential accessories for any yummy mummy.

MONSTER MOUTH

DAVE: We had some teeth built, which was the final part of the make-up, which really distorted his mouth, which was in the description of the mummy. It's almost like a *Nosferatu* idea; these nasty little rat-like teeth are protruding from the mouth. So that was very important, to have that aspect of it.
LOU: Chris Lyons from Fangs FX made them for us. They really, really distorted James's face and they made his cheekbones look bigger. They made him look more sunken and it just added another aspect to the make-up and completely changed it.

You should see his teeth *after* the falsies are added.

QUICK ON HIS FEET

DAVE: One of the aspects of this particular mummy is that it has to move very fast. So we immediately threw out any idea of just wrapping his feet in bandages because we figured that that would be disastrous, and that he'd slip and fall or tread on something. We had to construct the feet over something very, very tight fitting.
LOU: They're almost like little kung fu trainers. So they were really, really soft, almost like a little fabric sock with a sole on them. They were really tiny. I just basically started to wrap everything around and glue it. Then we had these long extra pieces that came off the body suit that we would then pull down and snap onto the shoe, and then just do a little bit of extra wrapping. It blended in – it actually worked out really well, you couldn't tell.
DAVE: It meant that he could move really fast and not really worry about what he was going to tread on or slip on.

Dave and Lou Elsey doing a bit of maintenance.

IN THE CHAIR

LOU: The first day it took two hours to put the make-up on, then it probably took about 15 minutes to put the suit on and bring it all together. The second day, I think we did it in an hour and a half. Then the third day it was even quicker.

DAVE: Make-up always gets quicker but this was a very efficient process that we worked out. There were eight appliances that we applied to his face. The cowl made him look like you imagine Captain America's mask, and then the rest of it gets blended into it.

LOU: Then we had the neck jewellery collar piece that was attached to the make-up around the jaw, and then the suit, gloves, shoes and teeth.

I remember Dave, myself and Isibeal [Ballance], the producer, looking at the monitor as they were shooting and we were like, "Who has more fun than this us? This is the best job in the world!" At the end of the day, you get to play around with all your mates and make a load of monsters. It's pretty cool.

DAVE: It's pretty nice to think that we can all come together once a year and just have fun. It's a fantastic thing – I'd do that forever.

A Ghost Story For Christmas: Lot No 249 is on iPlayer.

"ARE YOU MY MUMMY?"

Mark Gatiss on bringing new terror to an old classic

I was very keen to do something a bit different, and yet... this is what I always call the *Hound Of The Baskervilles* problem: you suddenly realise you're sitting in a room where many people have sat before, "How we gonna do this fucking dog?"

With the mummy you go, "Well, there's a certain amount of practical considerations. How do you do the bandages? Is that a bandage suit that the person can step in and out of when they want to have a wee?"

But my main thing was, I've always loved those mummies which look tanned, like bog bodies, where the skin has become like leather, more than the sort of dusty revenant. So I wanted to have a bit more of that quality to it. Then David and Lou did about 10 or 12 concept designs.

The one I really liked had a North African feel to it. It has hoops on its neck, which make it very elongated, and James is already six foot six. Just a really lovely texture – there's lots of jewellery in it, which appears to have fallen into the ribcage and stuff like that. It's a beautiful design. It's scary and beautiful, which is kind of what you want.

The team follows the person around repairing things because if you speak it cracks, if you blink it cracks. So most of that is repairing the edges around the mouth or the eyes or reapplying things. It's a really good mummy and James is such a brilliant physical performer, he completely got it and how to do it.

When the mummy was destroyed I realised that what we definitely needed was dust. We shot this separately actually, because we ran out of time – we did it another day, just from the side of Freddie [Fox, actor] with the autopsy knife against the side of the sarcophagus.

What he's stabbing is several pillows taped together, but they are absolutely larded with dust and it's so satisfying! So when he stabs it in the light it just poofs in his face like mushroom spores. Desperately unhealthy.

Mark Gatiss, Kit Harington and James Swanton.

INTO THE BUFFYVERSE

***BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER* HAS RISEN FROM THE GRAVE WITH NEW AUDIO DRAMA SLAYERS, FEATURING ORIGINAL CAST MEMBERS**

WORDS: **WILL SALMON**

FEW TV SHOWS HAVE HAD AS MUCH LASTING INFLUENCE as *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. The beloved series ran for seven seasons between 1997 and 2003 and, in one swift strike of a wooden stake, changed the way that fantasy dramas looked and felt forever. *Buffy* paved the way for more daring and emotional small-screen storytelling, and without it it's hard to imagine shows like *Cobra Kai*, *Riverdale* or Russell T Davies's heartfelt reinvention of *Doctor Who*.

There's little doubt that it's been a rough few years for the show's legacy. A planned reboot was announced in 2018 but remains "on pause", perhaps permanently, while the show's creator and former geek godhead Joss Whedon has spent the last few years mired in controversy. →

Laya DeLeon Hayes (front) as new slayer Indira.

Co-writer Christopher Golden (left) at recording.

It was a surprise and delight, then, when a new *Buffy* audio drama was recently announced. The nine episodes that make up Audible Originals' *Slayers* reunite much of the TV show's cast in a reality-bending story that Spike actor James Marsters says was "heaven on Earth" to make.

Slayers is co-written by long-time *Buffy* spin-off authors Christopher Golden and Amber Benson, who also reprises her role as Tara Maclay. That's perhaps a little surprising given that her character was infamously killed off in the TV show's sixth season, but *Slayers* takes place across both the core *Buffy* universe and a parallel reality, enabling the new drama to put its own spin on the mythology, while still adhering to the canon. How did it come about?

"Chris Golden had been working with Lydia [Shamah, director of original content at Audible] and he found out that they had gotten the licence to do audios," says Benson. "He reached out to me and, honestly, I wasn't 100% sure. I was like, 'Wow, it's been a long time since I've played this character and spent time in this world.'"

What eventually lured Benson back was the opportunity to work with someone she had never actually shared a scene with on the TV show. "We started talking about how wonderful it would be to create a world where we got to have Charisma Carpenter play Cordelia as a vampire slayer and that was sort of the pull for me, to see Charisma, who I love. We had never worked together until a few years ago, when we both worked on a little independent film [2018's *The Griddle House*], and I was so blown away with how good she was. That was the impetus for me to get involved."

> **"Spike is a vampire. He doesn't age, and I have. So I thought I'd never play him again"**

Slayers picks up a decade or so after the end of the TV show. Reformed vampire-with-a-soul Spike is still in LA (finally, proof that the city survived the cliffhanger ending of *Angel* season five!) and working undercover, trying to convince the local demons that he's reverted to his evil ways. There he crosses paths with new slayer Indira, played by Laya DeLeon Hayes, who is struggling with her first day on the job.

"Indira is a way into the mythology," says Benson. "She is sort of like a Reddit forum in human form! She knows everything about the slayer mythology, so she's a great way to give a lot of information to listeners who maybe don't have a lot of background knowledge when it comes to this world."

The two quickly form an alliance, which comes in handy when the aforementioned alt universe comes into play and brings Spike face-to-face with both a variant of his sadistic former lover Drusilla (Juliet Landau) and her girlfriend, Tara.

For Marsters, returning to the role that made him famous was a delightful surprise. "I can't play Spike now, if you're filming me," he acknowledges. "Spike is a vampire. He doesn't age, and I have. I thought that I'd never get to play him again, so when Amber called me and asked if I was interested in doing an audio project, I leapt at it. He's one of my favourite characters, and the chance to work with Juliet again, I would never pass that up."

Marsters (Spike) and Juliet Landau (Drusilla).

Despite their many years of working together, Marsters says that he still finds Landau a thrillingly unpredictable performer. "There are actors who will give you the same thing, take after take, and you kind of know what's about to happen. And there are actors where it's always a surprise, because they keep you on your toes.

"That happened on *Slayers*. We weren't looking into each other's eyes, we were listening to each other over headphones, but the same kind of feeling came over me, like I really don't know what's gonna happen next. And that's just gold."

"That's one of the things about these characters," says Landau. "They're so rich. Drusilla is delicate, but she's powerful. She's ethereal, but she's strong. She's childlike, but she's sensual. She's sensitive, but she's nefarious and diabolical."

The love affair between the two is at the heart of *Slayers*. "They've had a relationship that has spanned 200 years and you're really not sure in this whether Spike is going to go back to Drusilla and return to the dark side, or if he is going to betray her – again!"

Co-writer Amber Benson appears as Tara Maclay.

Charisma Carpenter is back as Cordelia.

"Well, you did it first, Dru!," Marsters retorts, slipping into Spike's familiar drawl. "You took up with a mucus demon!"

SLAYING IT

Let's quickly address the demonic elephant in the room... Actors Sarah Michelle Gellar, Nicholas Brendon and Alyson Hannigan – aka the three core members of the Scooby Gang on TV – do not feature in *Slayers*, though their characters are referenced throughout

Despite these notable absences, *Slayers* marked a reunion for a large number of the TV show's cast members. As well as Marsters, Landau, Benson and Carpenter, the series also brings back Anthony Head as Giles, Emma Caulfield Ford as Anya, Danny Strong as Jonathan, James Charles Leary as Clem ("Perfectly cast, he doesn't have to do much to be hilarious in that role," says Marsters), and even Phina Oruche as Giles's occasional girlfriend, Olivia.

While it's now perfectly possible to record audio in high quality from anywhere in the world, everyone was keen to physically reunite. "We were in the same studio together," confirms Landau. "James was not feeling well, so he was in a glass booth, but we were all working in one space except for Tony [Head], who was patched in from the UK."

Benson describes the reunion as being "a bit like [US "town reunion" tradition] Old Home Week. The reason this works and why it's as good as it is, I think, is a testament to all of us being together and the energy that created. When you're opposite Juliet Landau, and she's looking at you with hungry 'I'm gonna do naughty things with you' eyes, it's pretty hot!"

Marsters says that *Slayers* offered a chance for him to explore new facets of his character. "I was always interested in exploring Spike having a soul. We left him just as he'd gotten one and the question is, what is he going to do with that? What is having a conscience going to keep him from doing? What is he going to try to become, and how much of the old bad boy can be retained?"

In contrast – and despite the fact that *Slayers* features an alternative universe version of Drusilla – Landau says that her character's motivation is actually very similar to the prime variant. "What drives Drusilla is really a love for Spike. Everything that she sets in motion here is out of passion and caring for him."

Partly that's because the Spike from her universe has died. "Yes, when this Spike shows up it changes her plans and either augments or derails them, depending on whether he does or does not go along with them. But I think that when she sees him, it's a revelation to her. She is over the moon that he's back."

HAPPY ENDINGS?

The fact that so many of the characters who died in the TV show have returned for *Slayers* is noticeable, especially in the case of Tara and Cordelia, whose fates remain controversial to this day. There is a sense, perhaps, that *Slayers* is in part about giving the characters, the actors and the fans a somewhat happier, though not uncomplicated, fate than the TV show ultimately allowed them.

"I felt a lot of pressure when we were developing *Slayers*, and I know Chris did as well," admits Benson. "You want to do justice to the universe.

"We really wanted to make this into something positive, especially for the fans. There was a lot of emotional stuff and baggage tied to getting involved with *Slayers* and we really wanted to be mindful of that."

As for whether the series will return for a second season, nothing has been confirmed as yet, but the signs are looking positive. As we wrap up our chat, Marsters proudly announces that *Slayers* has just been announced as the number one download on Audible. "There's a lot of interest and I think that Audible is going to want to do more, and I'm certainly down. I think we're all excited to slip back into these characters and enter this world again."

"We would love to do season two," Benson confirms. "We already have lots of ideas and it's just a matter of getting the green light. We're in the process with that right now and we've got our fingers crossed that we can make it happen. But every cast member has taken me or Chris aside at some point and gone, 'Okay, so here's some thoughts about what I want my character to do in season two...'"

Slayers is out now from Audible Originals.

THE SOUND OF VIOLENCE

Biff! Bang! Pow!

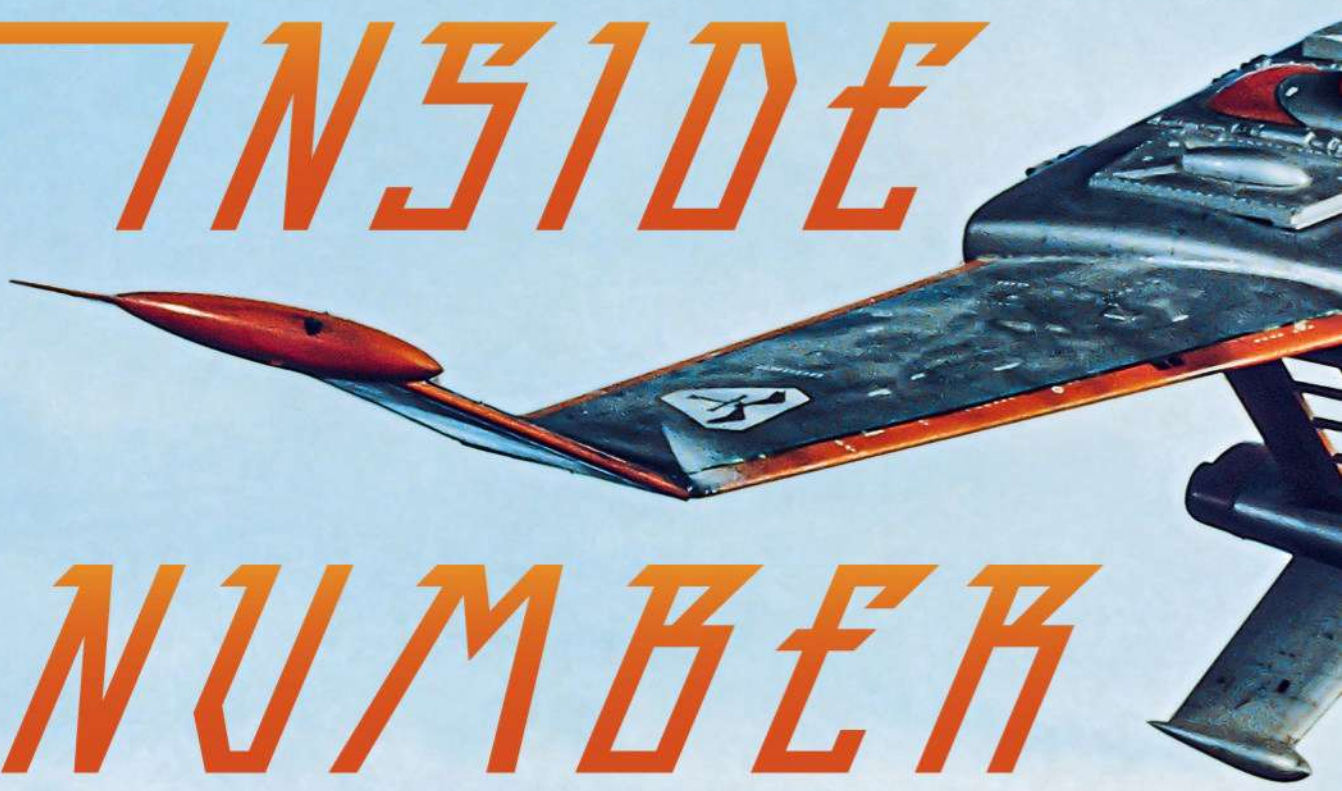
A lot of time and effort was spent fine-tuning *Slayers* so that it sounds as good as possible on high-end setups as well as your basic headphones. That starts with the show being recorded in Dolby Atmos, which offers an immersive surround sound listening experience.

"It places the audience member in the room with the characters," explains Marsters. "We recorded it just standing in one location with a microphone, but with the computer they moved us around the room. I saw the notes that they took, and they had blocked out all of the scenes and where [the characters] would be standing."

A criticism that is sometimes levelled at audio productions is that action scenes can often sound inauthentic or cheesy. To combat this, Benson says the production team paid particular attention to the fight choreography, despite the action scenes simply being sound effects and actors grunting and groaning rather than actual hits and kicks.

"Kc Wayland coordinated all the fight scenes. He would be like, 'I'm gonna point to you and you punch, then when I point to you, you take the punch' and so on. I think because Kc, Chris and I were hyper-focused on that, it does not sound cheesy. It sounds pretty real and in your face. I was really impressed with how it all turned out in the end."

INSIDE NUMBER NINESTEIN



EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED! AS *TERRAHAWKS* HITS 40, JAMIE ANDERSON SHARES THE SECRETS OF HIS FATHER'S QUIRKIEST CREATION

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

Just time for a team photo before saving the Earth.

MAYBE IT'S IN THE BLOOD, BUT Jamie Anderson is a self-confessed *Terrahawks* fan. "You make it sound like it's a bad thing!" laughs the son of television legend Gerry, quick to defend the honour of a series often regarded as a lesser entry in his dad's iconic canon. "I don't think it is for a minute.

"Much like every fan of *Doctor Who* has their Doctor, which is normally the one they joined the show with, every Anderson fan has their Anderson show. Obviously for many that's *Thunderbirds*, or *Space: 1999*. But then you've got the '80s kids, and for those people *Terrahawks* is their first Anderson love."

For Jamie, now flame-keeper of the Anderson empire, it's a series he grew up with. Literally. "Technically I was on set during production, although in utero!" he smiles.

"At home we had an old wooden bookshelf, which was used to store videos, and alongside *Thunderbirds* and *UFO* there were three VHS tapes of *Terrahawks*. I just started watching them one day. I loved the Zeroids – just the idea of these spherical, bouncing robots versus the baddies' Cube robots was so cool and exciting, and the slightly comedic edge really sold it to me as a kid.

"Then around the house dad had the original carved wooden shape that they used to make the moulds for Hudson [the show's astoundingly hi-tech Rolls Royce, owned by clone hero Dr "Tiger" Ninestein]. He had the same for one of the Cubes. He kept very few things, so he must have liked those elements. He also had a very small toy cabinet, where he kept a few odds and sods from over the years, and in there was a Zeroid toy, which I was allowed to take out and play with. The show was alive at home. It was my first exposure to science fiction, my first exposure to dad's shows."

ON A ROLL

Launched in October 1983, *Terrahawks* saw the Earth defended by a global taskforce pitted against the schemes of Zelda, the cackling, cadaverous android queen of the planet Guk. It not only marked Anderson's full-time return to puppetry after 1969's *The Secret Service*, but was the first series he had brought to the screen since the dying transmissions from *Space: 1999*'s Moonbase Alpha, six years earlier. So where do we find him, creatively and personally, going into this project?

"He was at a low, I'm afraid to say," Jamie admits to *SFX*. "This is post the dissolution of almost all of his creative and business partnerships. The Lew Grade days are gone. The Reg Hill collaboration is gone. His personal and professional relationship with Sylvia is gone, and that has some pretty

The Treehawk blasts off on another mission.

Action, Supermacromation-style!

© ANDERSON ENTERTAINMENT, EWBANK'S/BOURNEMOUTH NEWS/SHUTTERSTOCK

The *SFX* Christmas party was lots of fun.

Gerry Anderson and Christopher Burr.

Anderson's personal script for an episode.

enormous ramifications for him financially. So he is without work, without backing, without any of the team that had been around him for the previous 20 plus years.

"He was struggling. People were not giving him the work that he so desperately wanted. He was developing things but he had really been left out in the cold – or even inside in the cold, given he had to wear several layers of coats in his flat because he couldn't afford the heating!"

Anderson had recently failed in an ambitious bid to run one of ITV's regional franchises, a proposal he had put together with businessman Christopher Burr, who would ultimately partner with him on the new series.

"His whole life had gone from the crazy heights of 1963 to 1975 down to probably the lowest he had been in his adult life," says Jamie. "But mum said, 'You should keep talking to Christopher Burr, because he seems like a smart guy. He might have access to money. You should really cultivate that relationship' – which he wasn't very good at.

"That's the only reason they got anywhere with this, because Christopher had the connections and the wherewithal to make it happen. It wasn't what dad wanted to do, given the budgetary constraints. It's not like he was extremely happy. But he was working again. It was the first stepping stone to recovery. That's how he saw it. So it was pretty vital in continuing his career."

Might it even have been therapeutic, returning to the world of puppets that had made his name – despite his well-known frustrations with the medium? "I wouldn't say returning to puppets per se was therapeutic, but returning to any sort of production was definitely therapeutic.

"There was some element of recapturing the past but I'm certain that dad was not spending his time thinking, 'I'm going to build up a comparative thing to *Thunderbirds*,' because they were working in a very different time, on a very different budget.

"He certainly managed to do alright out of it. He managed to get his Rolls Royce back, which is such a symbolic thing in his life. I think the team called it the Gerryhawk! To him that meant 'I'm back up there.' It almost became more important than working again, the fact that he had this symbol of success back."

Terrahawks grew out of *Thunderhawks*, an unrealised animation project Anderson had been developing for the Japanese market with Tokyo's Tohokushinsha Film Corporation in the late 1970s. Many elements in the show's set-up are clear callbacks to past glories: Hudson echoes Lady Penelope's pink Roller FAB 1, while the ongoing alien threat mirrors *UFO* and *Captain Scarlet*. A fleet of gleaming, lustworthy craft is, of course, pure Anderson. Was *Terrahawks* essentially an attempt at a greatest hits?

"If you look at any single Anderson show, and you did a Venn diagram of all the elements, you will find that they are pretty similar," says Jamie. "They worked out very early on, post-*Stingray*, that having multiple vehicles was absolutely key, because that works for toys – and it's kind of thrilling to see which one they're going to choose each week.

"The idea of the hero pilot goes right back to dad's early days, with his late brother [RAF pilot Lionel Anderson] dying in the Second World War. It seems that it's a perpetual processing of that loss of the hero in his life.

"There are loads of familiar things. I guess it's part comfort zone, part what he actually enjoyed. He had an interest in robotics in the '80s so it made sense to have the Zeroids in there. He's combining past and present passions with contemporary influences."

Jamie has another, more personal take to share. "My pop culture analysis of *Terrahawks* is that it's the only one where dad's in it himself. We have 'Tiger' Ninestein, the grumpy leader, who perhaps is not the best with his team or other people, supported ably by Mary Falconer – and at the time dad was just about to marry Mary Robins.

"I really do feel that Ninestein and Mary are dad and mum onscreen, whether it was conscious or not, and some kind of acknowledgement of his slight failings as a leader and the stuff he'd gone through.

"Then depending on how schoolyard you want to get about it, 'Tiger' Ninestein is in conflict with the evil Zelda, who many would say is him taking revenge on Sylvia. There's some deeply personal stuff there, placed in a way that's obvious when you think about it, but probably not something that anyone could →

The Zeroids fall in, voiced by Windsor Davies.

Cy-Star, Yung-Star and Zelda. Lock up your sons!

litigate against! The one bit that worries me slightly is the introduction of It-Star, the evil baby character. Let's gloss over that!"

Filmed at Bray Studios, challenged daily by a tight £3 million budget, *Terrahawks* saw Anderson embrace a new style of puppetry, branded Supermacromation with customary razzmatazz. This was to be a strictly string-free zone, replacing the sculpted, electronically augmented wooden marionettes of his Supermarionation days with cheaper, more flexible latex creations, operated by hand inside their heads. Yes, Earth's first line of interplanetary defence was essentially a bunch of glove puppets.

"It was primarily a budget-led decision, and that was a great frustration for him," shares Jamie. "The *Thunderbirds*-style puppets had their own expensive operating elements, from the fact you need to build the gantry to hold the puppeteers over the sets, through to the fact the wires were so fine they were always bloody snapping right before the cameras would roll. They spent huge amounts of time trying to paint them out, and time's money.

"But I think he was always frustrated by the limitations of the lip-synch mechanism, and also the limitations of the expressions on the faces. With the *Terrahawks* puppets you could contort the face, often in a comedic way, just by twisting your hand around. They could blink and their eyes could move in all directions rather than just left-right. So there were some practical positives from these puppets, even if they weren't the most handsome, shall we say, of all the puppets ever created for television..."

Hello, Zelda. Resembling an exhumed corpse in one of Jareth the Goblin King's discarded frightwigs, the shrieking monarch of Guk ruled the nightmares of a generation.

"She was scary!" agrees Jamie of the malevolent old prune. "The face was so terrifying and gross, but it made her incredibly memorable. Also it was a very quick and easy way to be very unkind about your schoolteacher, or the grandmother or aunt that you didn't like. It was a character you could somehow relate to the real world."

She was a space witch, the ancient hag archetype given a futuristic make-over. "Yes, something you're so familiar with from fairy tale type stuff, but in a sci-fi setting. Also that voice! Denise Bryer was so good, she did such a fantastic job. She loved that character. She'd go round doing Zelda cackles until the very end.

Zelda's Martian lair. Difficult to heat.

"Who are you calling a malevolent old prune?"

© ANDERSON ENTERTAINMENT, EWBANK'S/BOURNEMOUTH NEWS/SHUTTERSTOCK

Yuri and Moid, a right proper pair of bad 'uns.

"She'd be wandering around Muswell Hill charity shops doing the voice to people! There was something very appealing about all that. One of those lovely confluences of great design and great performance. It just worked as a package."

Terrahawks was the first Anderson production to emerge in a post-*Star Wars* world. Recruiting the next generation of special effects talent, including Steve Begg – later to work on the Bond films – the series acknowledged the boom in screen SF.

"It's pretty clear *Star Wars* was going to have an influence," says Jamie. "There are some direct design elements and shot choices that replicate *Star Wars* moments as well as *Battlestar Galactica* and some other bits and pieces. But then of course *Star Wars* was referencing *Space: 1999* all over the place, so I think they had every single right to take inspiration, to pay homage, and put some pastiche in."

> **"I think they just hit a new stride in a new decade and did it in a new way"**

Accompanied by a synth-led main theme, the show's vector-style title graphics are also of their time. "All hand-drawn, of course. It's saying, 'Yes, computers can do this sort of thing, but obviously we can't afford that, so we'll get Kevin Davies to draw it by hand!' And it's very cool. It's very *Tron* and *The Last Starfighter*, very much of an era. It's all the better for being a time capsule."

One key creative choice sets *Terrahawks* apart from its contemporaries, as well as the earnest tone of live-action Anderson dramas *UFO* and *Space: 1999*. Powered by a sly sense of irony, the whole thing is clearly played with a planet-sized wink.

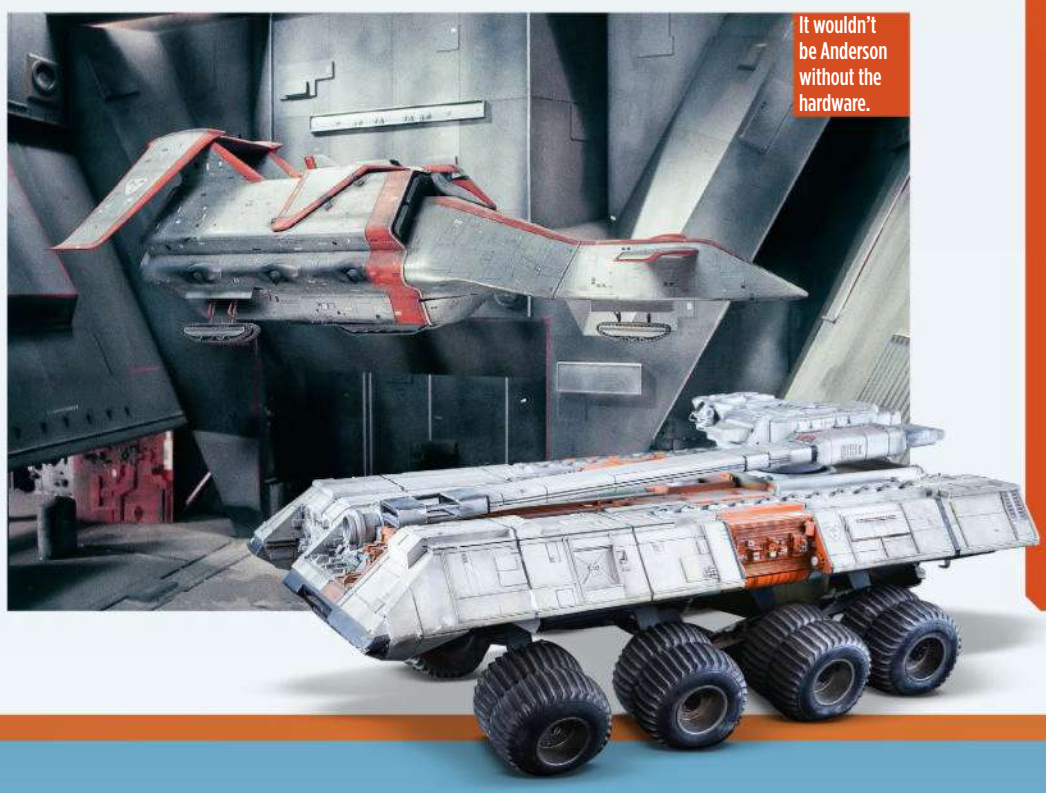
"If you look back to *Stingray* and *Thunderbirds*, there was comedy there," says Jamie. "It wasn't the same sort of self-awareness, taking the piss out of the characters and the show itself, but there was the ability to enjoy it on two levels.

"I think they just hit a new stride in a new decade and did it in a new way. As the series progresses you see it getting funnier and sillier and more pantomime. By the time you reach the last 13 episodes, it's really found its feet and it's leaning on its comedy chops. Zelda was scary for kids but you're shielded by the humour and the silliness."

Terrahawks ended after three seasons in July 1986. "The intention was there to carry on, but sadly the cash was not," says Jamie. As its 40th anniversary is celebrated by the release of an original soundtrack album and a flurry of new books, the series remains a touchstone for many, a launchpad into the Andersonverse.

"In an interview around 10 years ago, Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright were talking about remaking an Anderson classic, and they went for *Terrahawks* as a live-action film. So if it resonated with them, clearly it must have done something to a certain generation!"

Terrahawks is available on DVD and Blu-ray.



It wouldn't be Anderson without the hardware.

RETURN FLIGHT

What's happened to the reboot?

In 2019, Anderson Entertainment announced that a new series titled *Kate Kestrel And The Terrahawks* was in the works.

"We're still actively developing it," Jamie Anderson reveals. "Around 10 months ago it was about to go into formal pre-pre-production development, shall we say, with a major international partner. And then there was a change of guard and it got dropped, as so often happens. What we've come up with is a fantastic way to feed into the past, while making it more contemporary and more resonant with an audience now.

"These days, for true international appeal, the aspiration is live-action, and it has been developed as such. It's a proper premium live-action science fiction drama."

In the original series, Kate Kestrel was the candyfloss-coiffed pilot who combined planetary defence with a pop career (raise your game, Taylor Swift!).

"What is always so key when you're redeveloping an existing property is to look at the whole thing and pull it apart, to look at every character, every element, every set-up, the dynamics between them, what drove the show originally, what made it connect with people, and then piece it back together, filling in the gaps, making a few nips and tucks.

"It just became apparent that this character had the most potential to be a really interesting focus. Not to say, 'Oh, it must be female-led now,' or anything like that, but she naturally came to the fore because of the way the world was being rebuilt.

"So she's the access and the focus character, but the rest of the guys are there, and if anything it's allowed us to elevate all of them, to show their true colours."

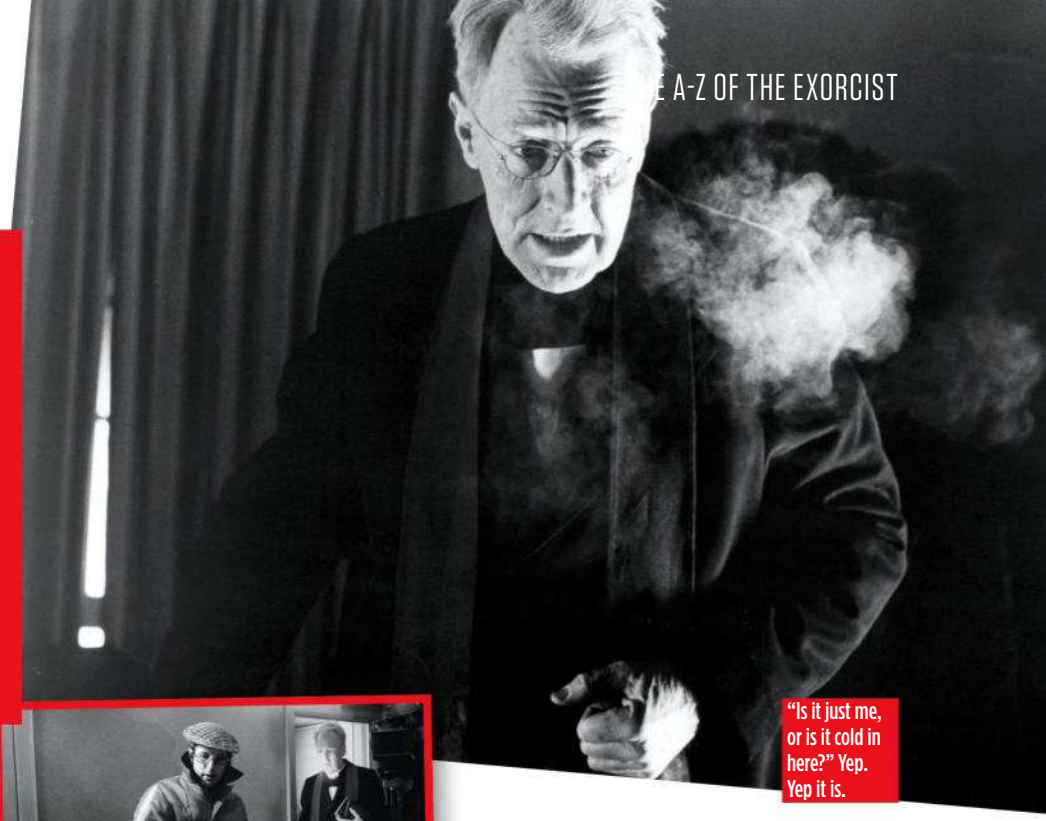
Jamie remains determined to bring the show to the screen. "As a *Terrahawks* fan myself, this one is not getting abandoned," he tells *SFX*. "I just hope someone will hurry up and write us a large cheque!"

Stay on this channel...

THE A-Z OF THE EXORCIST

WE CELEBRATE WILLIAM FRIEDKIN AND WILLIAM PETER BLATTY'S CLASSIC TALE OF POSSESSION, WHICH MARKED ITS 50TH ANNIVERSARY ON 26 DECEMBER

WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**



"Is it just me, or is it cold in here?" Yep. Yep it is.

A is for AIR CONDITIONING

The supernatural temperature drop during the exorcism scene required the actors' breath to be visible. Easily done now via CG, but in 1973 a practical solution was required. "What we did was place a gigantic restaurant air conditioner across the top of the set," director William Friedkin explained. "At the end of each day's shooting, we turned on the A/C all night so by the next morning it was 40 below zero [4.4 C]." [1] Small clip lights were also attached to the back of furniture, so that the cast's breath registered clearly.

B is for BAG MURDERS

Could the film feature a serial killer? Early on, Regan undergoes an angiography – a procedure for taking photos of the brain. Friedkin used a real NYU Medical Center radiologist for the scene, assisted by his technician, one Paul Bateson (pictured below on the right).

Four years later, *Variety* reporter Addison Verrill was found dead in his apartment. Bateson confessed to stabbing him after a sexual encounter, and was sentenced to 20 years. At the time, NYC police were investigating the "bag murders": six gay men whose dismembered remains were dumped in the Hudson River inside garbage bags.

During a sentencing hearing, the prosecutor noted that Bateson had told a friend "killing is easy", and talked about disposing of body parts in this fashion... Additional charges were never brought, though, due to lack of evidence.

C is for CURSE

The Exorcist acquired a reputation as "cursed", due to calamities occurring on-set, or to loved ones of the cast. For example:

- The MacNeil house interior set was destroyed in a fire.
- Linda Blair's grandfather died during production.

William Friedkin (left) with Max von Sydow.

- So did Max von Sydow's brother.
- Jack MacGowran (Regan's first victim, Burke Dennings) died from flu shortly after finishing work on the film.
- Linda Blair suffered a spinal fracture when being thrashed about on Regan's bed.
- Ellen Burstyn also injured her back, being jerked back on a wire.

But you could produce a similar list for many films. And they don't tend to be drawn up if the movie is a romcom, only when fostering an aura of supernatural menace is good PR.

D is for DAFFY DUCK

The more you are spoofed, the more you're part of the zeitgeist. In 1987 *Looney Tunes* short "The Duxorcist", for example, Daffy visits a possessed lady duck who levitates and head-spins, eventually expelling spirits from her by cracking a series of corny gags.

For more specific parody, see the opening of *Scary Movie 2* (2001), with James Woods as a priest whose reaction to a head-turn is, "F**k this!". Or 1990's *Repossessed* – starring Leslie Nielsen, alongside Linda Blair herself. Blair also spoofed her signature role in the 1987 short "The Heckling".

Riffing on Regan's obscene imprecations is a popular approach. In a 1975 *Saturday Night Live* sketch, Richard Pryor's priest was told, "Your momma eats kitty litter!". The *French And Saunders* take (1990) was, "Your mother sucks jelly babies in hell!". And a fleeting *Key & Peele* skit (2012) saw the priest pausing for thought upon hearing, "Let me suck your cock, motherf**ker!"

A scene from the *French And Saunders* sketch.

E is for THE EMPIRE OF LIGHT

Exorcist Father Merrin's arrival at the MacNeil house is an iconic moment, also featured on a classic poster. Exiting a taxi, he momentarily stands by a streetlamp, light streaming down from Regan's bedroom window. The shot was inspired by "L'Empire Des Lumières" ("The Empire Of Light") by René Magritte, featuring a street at night with a daytime sky. "This painting had a profound effect on me," explained Friedkin, who'd seen a 1950 version at New York's MoMA, "and I decided to put a figure in it." [2] →

WARNER BROS, GETTY, MALCOLM PARK/ALAMY, BBC

"The power of fishing lines compels you!"

F is for FOUR-LETTER WORDS

There are 19 top-tier swears in *The Exorcist*: 10 "f**k"s, five "f**king"s, one "motherf**king", one "c**ksucker", and two "c**ting"s – 13 of them spoken by Regan. She doesn't say "c**ting" first – that honour goes to Jack MacGowran's character. (For anyone wondering: no, the term wasn't coined by author/screenwriter William Peter Blatty. Though only added to the OED in 2014, this intensifying adjective's first citation is a letter written by TE Lawrence in the '30s.) All were removed when the film made its TV debut on CBS in February 1980 – as were "Your mother sucks cocks in hell" (overdubbed "Your mother still rots in hell") and multiple instances of "Jesus Christ!" (replaced with "Judas Priest!").

G is for GROUCHO

The Exorcist might never have existed if it weren't for the cigar-waggling Marx Brother. In 1961, Groucho was the host of quiz show *You Bet Your Life*. Author William Peter Blatty appeared on the 9 February edition, sharing winnings of $10,000 ($102,900 today). The prize money allowed Blatty to quit his job and write full time instead.

Blatty remained friends with the comedian, and 11 years later, ahead of filming Father Merrin's arrival at the house, he hatched a scheme to prank studio execs: "The plan was that not only would he appear at the door, he would take off his hat and it's Groucho Marx." [3] Groucho was game, but the gag was never ultimately shot.

H is for HANDGUNS

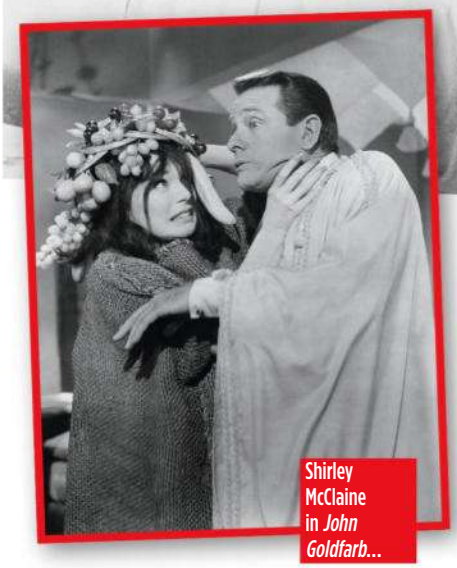
Friedkin had some eccentric methods for prompting an authentic reaction from his actors. Take the scene where Father Karras starts at a phone ringing: Jason Miller's jump was genuine, because his director had just fired off a handgun! Friedkin did this several times during filming. He got the idea from an article in the 22 December 1958 edition of *LIFE* about the making of *The Diary Of Anne Frank* – whose director, George Stevens, played the same rotten trick on his cast.

I is for IRAQ

The prologue, which introduces Father Merrin at an archeological dig, was shot in the ancient city of Hatra, in Iraq's Nineveh province. It wasn't the easiest place to make a movie...

In a letter to Warner Bros' Vice President, Friedkin wrote, "It is impossible to shoot without attracting every man, woman and child in the neighbourhood... You set up a tripod in the street here and you're like a visitor from Mars... The shooting day ends for all practical purposes at one o'clock – maybe two. It's just too hot to continue after that."

His production designer caught gastroenteritis, ending up in Mosul Hospital ("No bath, no towels, no toilet paper," Friedkin grumbled.) [4] And while the crew were in Iraq, an attempted coup took place, resulting in the head of the secret police being executed.

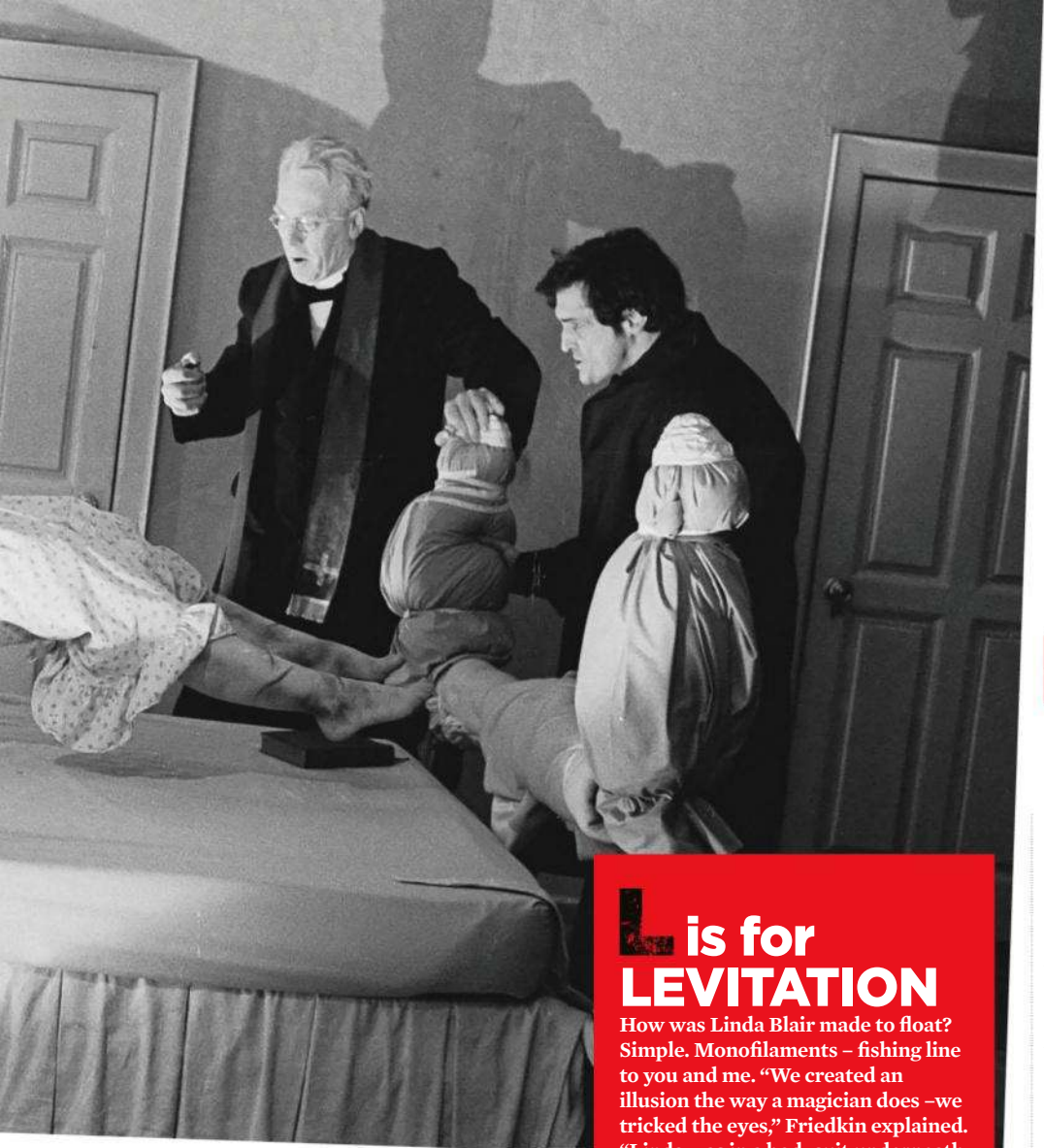


Shirley McClaine in *John Goldfarb...*

J is for JOHN GOLDFARB, PLEASE COME HOME

Scripted by Blatty from his own novel, this 1965 comedy about a US pilot who crashes in a fictional Arab country was helmed by British filmmaker J Lee Thompson (*The Guns Of Navarone*) and starred Shirley McClaine. Blatty later based the character of hack director Burke Dennings on Thompson, and actor Chris MacNeill on McClaine (by then a friend and

WARNER BROS, GETTY, ALAMY, SHUTTERSTOCK, NBC



L is for LEVITATION

How was Linda Blair made to float? Simple. Monofilaments – fishing line to you and me. "We created an illusion the way a magician does –we tricked the eyes," Friedkin explained. "Linda was in a bodysuit underneath her nightgown, and there were lots of monofilaments attached to the gown holding her up... The monofilaments were all attached to a gigantic plate situated above the set, and it allowed her to be pulled up by a group of stagehands... The shadows helped take your eye away from the wires." [1]

neighbour). She was also his first choice to play the role. But William Friedkin wasn't keen: "[She] had recently made a film called *The Possession Of Joel Delaney*... I thought that two films with her about demonic possession were one too many." [5]

K is for KNOCK-OFFS

In the wake of the film's box office success, European filmmakers stampeded to ride its coat-tails (and in several cases, were slapped with copyright infringement lawsuits by Warner Bros). Alberto de Martino's *The Antichrist*, Ovidio G Assonitis and Roberto Piazzoli's *Beyond The Door*, Juan Bosch's *Exorcismo* and Angelo Pannacciò's *The Return Of The Exorcist* are all worth a watch if rotating heads, shaking beds and foaming at the mouth float your boat. Turkey's *Seytan* is the most shameless – at times, it's practically a shot-for-shot copy. We also have a soft spot for William Girdler's *Abby*, an African-American spin on the concept whose heroine is possessed by Eshu, a horny-making Yoruba trickster.

Things get heated in the "homage" *Abby* (1974).

M is for MCCAMBRIDGE, MERCEDES

The actor who supplied the demonic voice was Mercedes McCambridge, 57-year-old star of films like *Giant* and *All The King's Men*. Speaking in 1974, she described it as "the most difficult performance of my life". An alcoholic saved by AA, McCambridge drew on "a remembered hell" of straitjacketed patients screaming in hospitals. Her chronic bronchitis came in handy for the demon's wheezy breathing. For a vomiting scene, she "swallowed 18 raw eggs, with a pulpy apple". And to convey a sense of restriction, she "had the crew tear up a sheet and bind me hand and foot". "My voice was ruined," she said. "For weeks, I couldn't talk above a whisper." [6]

N is for NORDINE, KEN

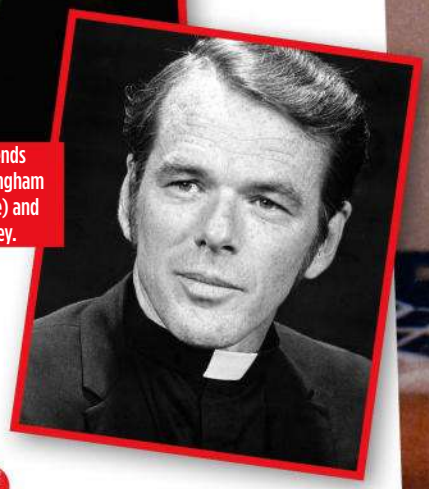
Heard the work of Ken Nordine? If not, pop onto Spotify and listen to his delightful 1957 album *Word Jazz*. Nordine – a former colleague of Friedkin's – was hired to experiment with methods of distorting Linda Blair's voice, using computers to mix in animal sounds. But the results were nixed.

"Ken played some tapes for me and it basically sounded like Ken Nordine doing a demon voice," the director explained. Anyone familiar with the aural honey that is Nordine's vocal tone will now be imagining an amusingly urbane, lounge lizard Pazuzu. "What it told me," Friedkin continued, "is that I had to go for a kind of unnatural sound. Neither male nor female." [3]

O is for ORDET

The one film Friedkin flagged as a direct inspiration was Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1955 drama *Ordet*. It centres on a woman who dies during labour. Her brother-in-law believes that she can be raised from the dead, if the family trusts in God.

After he declares, "In the name of Jesus Christ, I bid thee, arise", the woman revives in her coffin. Friedkin admired the staging; the "elegant simplicity" which added to the scene's authenticity. "You totally believe it. There is no question that this is happening – it's not a cinematic trick. I asked the *Exorcist* audience to believe in what they were seeing." [2] →



Reverends Bermingham (above) and O'Malley.

P is for PRIESTS

Two real-life priests took supporting roles. Karras's friend Father Dyer was played by the Reverend William O'Malley; Blatty had befriended the priest (who also taught drama) after reading his review of the novel. The Reverend Thomas Bermingham, meanwhile – who taught the author Latin at prep school, and pointed the young Blatty towards a *Washington Post* piece which inspired the novel – appeared as the President of Georgetown University. Both men also acted as technical advisors.

Q is for QUIETNESS

The quest to source the soundtrack had two false starts. First, Friedkin screened the film for renowned Hitchcock collaborator Bernard Herrmann. The meeting turned sour, according to Friedkin, when Herrmann declared, "I think I can save this piece of shit!" [2].

Next was *Bullitt* and *Enter The Dragon*'s composer, Lalo Schifrin. According to editor Bud Smith, Friedkin was so disgusted by the results that "He ran out the front of [post-production facility] Todd A-O and threw it across the street into the parking lot." [7]

A conventional orchestral score, Friedkin argued, was just too *overpowering*, drowning out his team's experimentation with subtly unnerving sound effects. These included recordings of a bee trapped in a jar, hamsters in a cage, and pigs squealing in a slaughterhouse.

R is for ROTATING HEAD

Regan's head doesn't turn right round in Blatty's novel, and the author wanted the effect cut, arguing that a full 360 would surely kill the girl. (David Gordon Green seems to agree.) Thankfully, he was overruled.

Effects man Marcel Vercoutere built a remote control-operated dummy, with Dick Smith then applying make-up to it. Only at the last minute did Smith realise that they'd forgotten something: visible breath! The accompanying sound effect was created by sound technician Gonzalo Gavira, by simply manipulating an old leather wallet.

S is for SUBLIMINALS

Strictly speaking, there *are* no "subliminals" in The Exorcist – a true subliminal is below the human threshold for conscious perception. A better term is "flash frames". The eerie white face seen, for example, when Father Karras dreams of his mother comes from a rejected make-up test for the possessed Regan, performed on double Eileen Deltz. "Some months later in the cutting room, the editor Bud Smith showed me [it] again," Friedkin recalled. "He said, 'Look at this frame.' When you see just a frame or two of it it's shocking, and it speaks volumes." [2]

T is for TUBULAR BELLS

After two false starts with the music (see Q), Friedkin turned to existing works by avant-garde composers like Krzysztof Penderecki and Anton Webern. But the real eureka moment came when, in the process of needle-dropping scores of records, he stumbled on Mike Oldfield's debut album.

Tubular Bells had the similarity to Brahms's "Lullaby" he was looking for (plus a subtly disconcerting metre: the figure at the beginning is in 15/8, not 4/4). The publicity boost the LP received from its two brief appearances helped Oldfield secure a US number one, a Grammy, and the highest honour of all: *Top Of The Pops* troupe Ruby Flipper dancing to it in the *Blue Peter* garden. (See bit.ly/rubularbells)

WARNER BROS, GETTY, ALAMY, SHUTTERSTOCK, VIRGIN

Regan (Linda Blair) lets fly with the pea soup.

The Regan dummy is now on display at New York City's Museum of the Moving Image.

U is for UNCREDITED

Friedkin was ruthless in pursuit of his vision. Stacey Keach, originally cast as Father Karras, fared best – paid off in full when the director decided to use Jason Miller instead. Ken Nordine, however, (see N) had to sue Warner Bros to get paid for his early vocal experiments – torpedoing that old friendship.

In 2005, Lalo Schifrin (see Q) called working with Friedkin "One of the most unpleasant experiences of my life," speculatively adding, "In the past we had an incident... I think he wanted vengeance." [8] And Mercedes McCambridge (see M) was shamefully treated.

"I didn't get any credit at all in the first 26 prints," McCambridge told a TV interviewer. "And I was promised – they showed it to me... It was a lovely big card in the graphics room at Warners. The film was released, there's nothing there." [9]

V is for VOMIT

Regan's puke was projected via hidden tubes strapped to her face, connected to a pump loaded with a mix of porridge and pea soup. Effects technician Marcel Vercoutere was tasked with hitting Jason Miller on the chest in one shot. "When I let go I hit Jason fresh in the face. He went backwards, and if he could have got a hold of me..." The shot was redone, but it was the take with Miller's genuine surprise that made the cut. "It was a nice mistake." [7]

W is for WEISS INITIALEN

The film opens very simply: shots of the MacNeil home and religious statuary, then red text on a black background. Released in 1931, the typeface Weiss Initialen (okay, technically a *family* of typefaces) was created by German painter/calligrapher Emil Rudolf Weiß. You may also have seen it on the cover of Van Morrison's LP *Astral Weeks*.

In choosing it, title designer Dan Perri was taking his cue from the novel's dustjacket. Putting red text on black is trickier than you'd think, apparently. "When it's exposed against black it tends to 'bloom'. It swells, it glows," Perri explained [10]. "I had to do a lot of exposure tests just to get the right red."

X is for X CERTIFICATE

The film's original UK certification was uncontroversial: passed as an X, with no cuts. In 1981, it was released on VHS by Warner Home Video. After the "video nasties" panic, 1984's Video Recordings Act saw the BBFC given four years to evaluate all the titles already released. In 1988, they concluded that *The Exorcist* was inappropriate for home viewing, and it was pulled from shelves.

BBFC director James Ferman expressed paternalistic concern that "immature girls will be drawn to this particular video because the central character is a 12-year-old girl", citing "advice from child psychologists that it could be seriously disturbing to young people of this age". [11] The ban was finally overturned in 1998, after the film was resubmitted.

Y is for YOUTH EXPLOSION

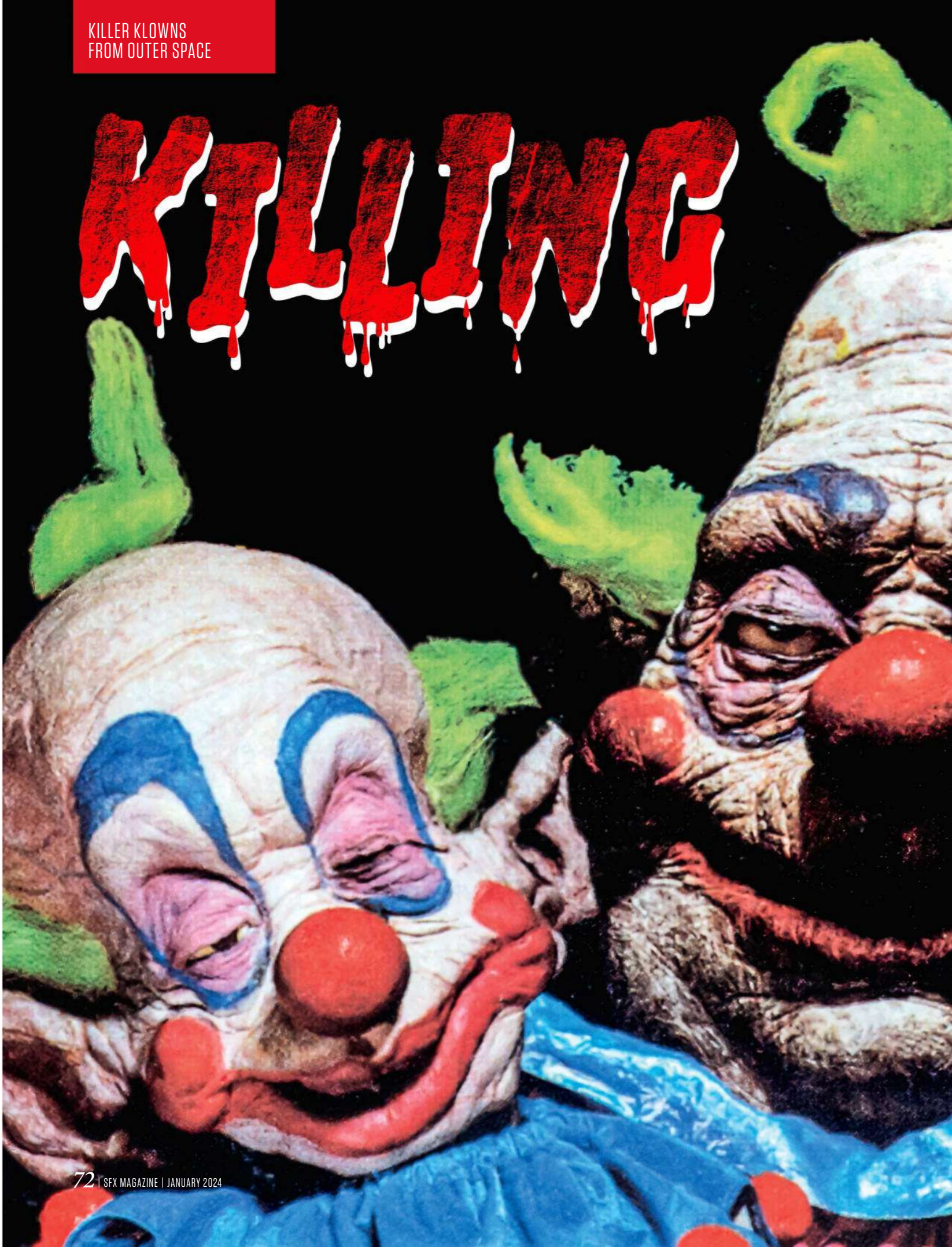
Stephen King had an interesting theory about *The Exorcist*: that it's *really* about the Generation Gap. "Substantively," he wrote, "it is a film about explosive social change, a finely honed focusing point for that entire youth explosion that took place in the late '60s and early '70s. It was a movie for all those parents who felt, in a kind of agony and terror, that they were losing their children and could not understand why or how it was happening". [12]

Z is for ZODIAC KILLER

On 29 January 1974, the San Francisco Bay Area murderer known as the Zodiac wrote to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, describing *The Exorcist* as "the best saterical comidy [sic] that I have ever seen". Since the letter closed with a threat to "do something nasty... if I do not see this note in your paper", it was promptly published on 31 January. Sadly, we'll never know how many stars he'd have awarded *The Exorcist: Believer* – well, unless he's out there and would care to email sfx@futurenet.com...

1 Directors Guild Of America (www.dga.org). 2 *Leap Of Faith: William Friedkin On The Exorcist*. 3 *The Exorcist Legacy* by Nat Segaloff. 4 *Behind The Exorcist* (theexorcist.tumblr.com). 5 *The Friedkin Connection* by William Friedkin. 6 *New York Times*. 7 *The Fear Of God: The Making Of The Exorcist*. 8 *Score* Magazine (scoremagacine.com). 9 *Cinema Showcase*, 15 May 1981. 10 *Art Of The Title* (artofthetitle.com). 11 BBFC.co.uk 12 *Danse Macabre* by Stephen King.

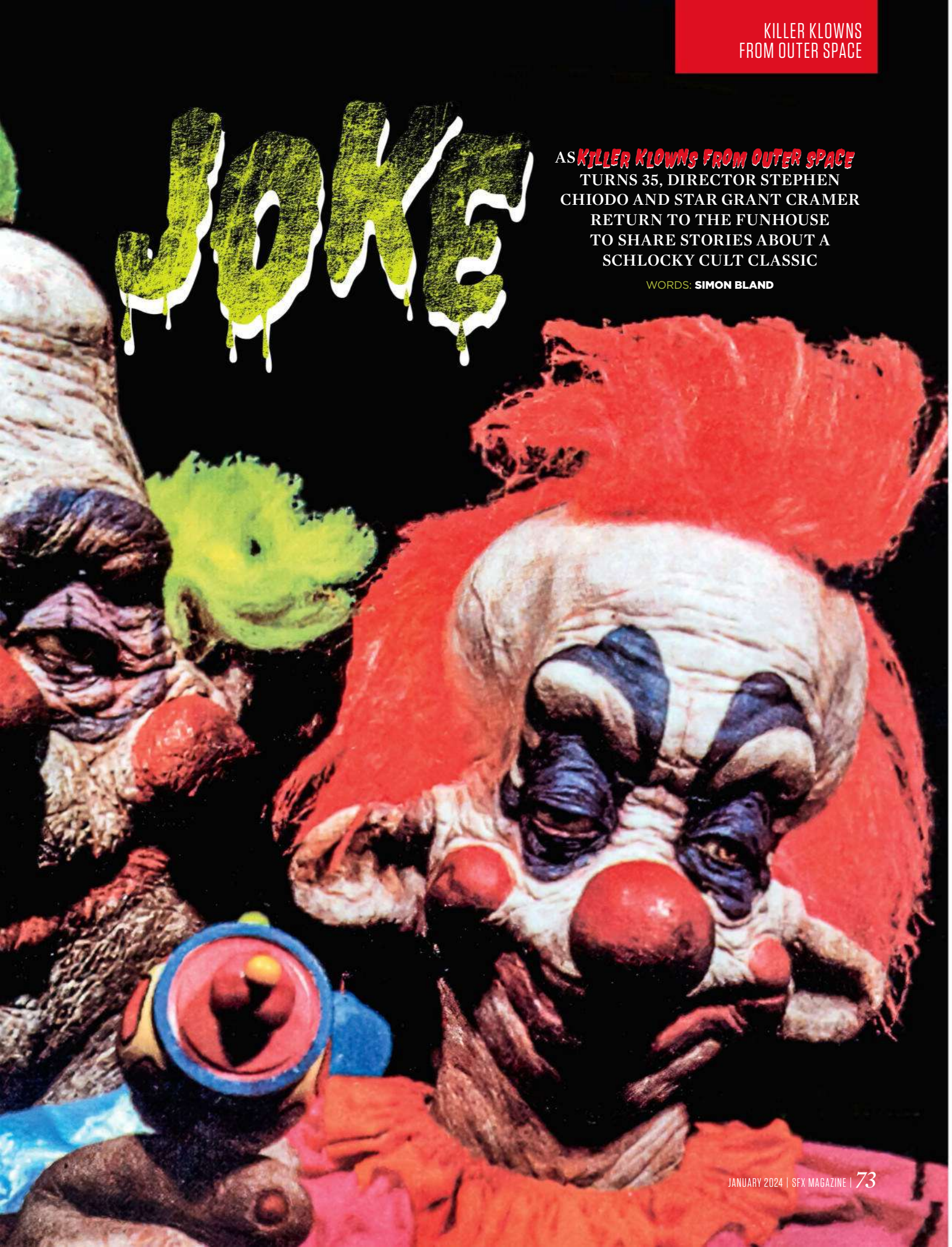
KILLING



JOKE

AS *KILLER KLOWNS FROM OUTER SPACE* TURNS 35, DIRECTOR STEPHEN CHIODO AND STAR GRANT CRAMER RETURN TO THE FUNHOUSE TO SHARE STORIES ABOUT A SCHLOCKY CULT CLASSIC

WORDS: **SIMON BLAND**



Klowns carefully cap cotton wool cocoons.

John Allen Nelson, Suzanne Snyder and Grant Cramer.

"MY BROTHERS AND I made a film filled with all of the things we enjoyed and wanted to see in a movie," says Stephen Chiodo, one quarter of the sibling filmmaker team behind 1988's colourful and brilliantly titled *Killer Klowns From Outer Space*.

"We threw in all of the '50s and '60s sci-fi elements that we loved, plus bits of *Looney Tunes* and Laurel and Hardy. We made it for ourselves," he smiles. "It's remarkable that people have taken to it and that it's still around."

Now 35 years old, the Chiodo brothers' bizarre mash-up of horror, sci-fi, comedy and attention-stealing practical effects made their sole directorial effort a late-night classic. However, in a turn of events that surprised even them, its legacy has lasted more than three decades, spawning toys, apparel, Halloween Horror Nights attractions, fancy dress costumes and even a videogame, due for release in 2024.

KLOWN KONCEPTION

As you might expect from its title, *Killer Klowns From Outer Space* doesn't take itself too seriously. Directed by Stephen and written with his siblings Edward and Charles, it takes us to a California beach town on the night of an alien invasion. However, these aren't your standard ETs. Forget xenomorphs and Predators, these intergalactic visitors take the form of grotesque circus clowns with a hunger for human flesh and a murderously macabre sense of humour.

It's up to Mike Tobacco (Grant Cramer), his girlfriend Debbie Stone (Suzanne Snyder) and her cop ex-hubby Dave Hansen (John Allen Nelson) to stop these big-top baddies before they kidnap local townsfolk, stick them in cotton wool cocoons and eat them on the way back to their home planet.

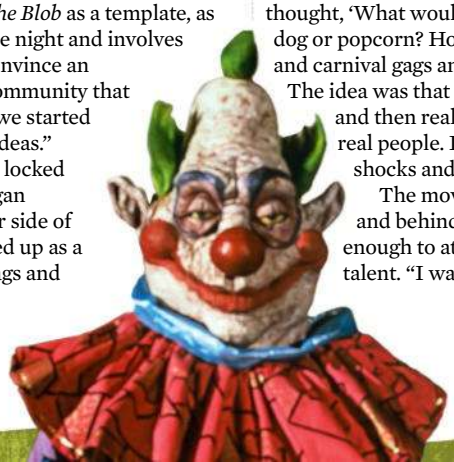
If you think that sounds wild, that's because it is. The film plays like a live-action cartoon; schlocky and frequently over-the-top, yet anchored by some eye-popping creatures created by its special effects artists the Chiodos. Having crafted the "Large Marge" scene from *Pee Wee's Big Adventure* and breathed life into the perpetually peckish Critters, the foursome were eager to put their skills to use on their own movie, and in doing so pulled out all the stops.

"I was trying to imagine the most frightening thing in the world," says Stephen, taking us back to the moment the trio came up with the film's bizarre plot. "I imagined driving up a lonely mountain road at night. A car behind passes me and when I look over to see the driver, it's a clown. That simple idea of a clown being somewhere it shouldn't be was scary to me. We used 1958's *The Blob* as a template, as that all happens in one night and involves teenagers trying to convince an unsuspecting adult community that there's danger. Then we started plugging in our own ideas."

With their concept locked down, the quartet began exploring the deadlier side of their conceit. "It ended up as a collection of circus gags and clown motifs twisted into what we called 'candy-coated kills'," smiles Stephen. "We took *Nightmare On Elm Street*'s dream-like kills and thought, 'What would you do with a balloon dog or popcorn? How would you take circus and carnival gags and kill people with them?'

The idea was that the audience would laugh and then realise that the victims were real people. It would be a mixture of shocks and laughter."

The movie's out-there storyline and behind-the-scenes skillset were enough to attract some emerging talent. "I was a serious thespian



ENTERTAINMENT PICTURES, ALAMY

KLOWNING AROUND

Director Stephen Chiodo reveals early plans to bring his Killer Klowns off the screen

Released in May 1988, *Killer Klowns From Outer Space* became a late-night hit, and so popular on rental that customers started stealing VHS copies from their local video stores. However, according to its director, he and his brothers had bigger dreams for their effects-heavy epic.

"We had aspirations of it becoming a midnight movie, like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, because it has so many fan-favourite moments," says Stephen. "I saw a screening of it once where the audience said many of the lines out loud because they were so memorable."

They even wanted to bring the clown action off the screen and into the cinema: "When the clowns shoot the popcorn guns and popcorn flies into the air, we wanted to do that in the theatre so popcorn was raining down on people," he smiles. "It would've been so much fun to have that at screenings."

Quick, get the merch machine fired up!

Grant Cramer as the wholesome Mike Tobacco.

busting my butt in acting school and doing small plays," remembers Grant Cramer, who went on to star as reluctant hero Mike Tobacco. After appearing in 1984's raunchy comedy *Hardbodies*, he was busy nurturing a career as a dramatic actor and trying to avoid typecasting when the Chiodos' screenplay crossed his path: "I read this script and went: 'What?' If I wanted an unconventional role, I got it."

The opportunity to interact with handmade special effects was also a selling point. "I heard the Chiodo brothers were these super-talented young guys who did stop-motion and were going to do something awesome with the clowns," continues Grant. "I went to their workshop and saw what they were building. One of the reasons you get into acting is to have crazy adventures and I said to myself, 'This is definitely a crazy adventure.'"

When it came to making the movie's colourful killers, the Chiodos had a blast bringing them to life. "I began designing the clowns like those giant mechanical mannequin dolls that hold sale signs," explains Stephen. "Charlie did some drawings and made sculptures. but added a more organic quality that took away the doll motif I originally had in mind."

It was a change that also helped the brothers add to the clowns' lore: "They became an alien species of pulpy white slugs that just happened to have leopard-like markings that were very

> **"We figured they come from a planet with different gravity, so they walk slowly"**

much like our clown designs," he explains. "They were slug-type humanoids – that's the world of the clowns."

It's this visceral aesthetic that helped the Chiodos' clowns walk the visual tightrope of playfully lighthearted yet genuinely terrifying. It also inspired their movement. "We figured they come from a planet with different gravity, so they walk slowly, like they're underwater. It reminded us of those big dummy guys from William Cameron Menzies's *Invaders From Mars*, with the zippers running up their backs," he laughs, citing another key sci-fi influence.

"We wanted them to look unique, so we gave each a different geometric shape. There was a round one, a pear-shaped one... when you saw them as a silhouette, they were distinct."

Additional sci-fi inspirations can also be found within the clowns' spaceship: a garish big top tent that gives way to a sprawling neon interior, full of circus gags and candy-coloured alien tech. "Cotton candy is part of the carnival motif and we just put a deadly spin on it," Stephen tells us. "The cotton candy cocoons came from *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*' pods and a film called *Beast From Haunted Cave*, which was something that inspired Ridley Scott's cocoons in *Alien*.

"The power chamber in the big top spaceship was influenced by the Krell laboratory in *Forbidden Planet*," he adds. "It helped us show that the ship defied reality and it was essentially a funhouse. It was all stealing but putting our own Chiodo brothers twist on things."

For the human cast, acting opposite these larger-than-life creatures required a leap of →

faith: "As an actor, you have to trust your filmmakers and we really had to trust the Chiodos," admits Cramer. "I was trying to be a very serious actor and Stephen wanted me to be super-animated and passionate all the time. I gave myself the challenge of always trying to be real, no matter how big he wanted my reactions to be," he says. "I trusted that it was going to work for the film whenever I felt like I was untethered and leaping off from grounded reality."

While Stephen had Mike Tobacco turning things all the way up to 11, other actors helped to sell the movie's goofy, joke-led murder scenes by playing it straight. John Keith Vernon's Officer Mooney is a case in point.

> **"We go to conventions with the cast, talk to fans and they really love the performances"**

As Stephen and Cramer explain, his gruff take on Dave's grumpy police partner helped provide some legitimacy to an otherwise outlandish caper.

"At times, they had to play it absolutely straight and couldn't wink at the camera or play the joke. If they did, it would've been more stupid than it really was," says Stephen of his cast. "I don't think the audience would've embraced it as much."

Cramer adds: "I was very excited to work with John. He had done *National Lampoon's Animal House*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* and a bunch of iconic movies, and even though he delivered a very comic performance, it's also very serious. You could take it out of this movie and put it into a serious movie and it'd still work."

This mixture of styles gave audiences permission to join the Chiodos on every comical kill and weird set-piece they could dream up, including their climactic Clown-Zilla ending. "We had originally wanted to make the Clown-Zilla big boss stop-motion animated because that was our forte, but we couldn't afford it," reveals Stephen.

"Making a puppet, animating it and doing all the post-production work was too expensive, even for our own movie. So we opted for the quicker technique of a man in a suit, which was my brother Charlie."

When production had wrapped after six weeks of night shoots, Stephen was exhausted and unsure of what exactly he'd captured. Then again, so was the studio funding the movie: "Trans World Entertainment had no idea what we were doing, but we were left alone to make the movie we wanted to make," he tells us. "They assumed we were going to have men with white faces, knives and chainsaws killing

There were 15 different actors playing Klowns.

Mike and Debbie make a quick dash for it.

Klowns creep craftily 'cross candy-coloured tops.

The security guard (David Piel): not gonna last...

Keep your mind out of the gutter: they're cocoons.

PRACTICAL MAGIC

Director Stephen Chiodo reckons that hand-made special effects are on the up...

If there's one thing that'll snap you out of your streamer-scrolling coma quickly, it's the image of the Chiodos' grotesque aliens on the cover artwork of *Killer Klowns From Outer Space*. Hit play and its murderous stars steal every scene they're in, thanks to hand-made special effects.

In an age of CG numbness, it's this element that makes the film refreshing, suggests its director: "I think younger audiences, who have been brought up on CG effects exclusively, revisit '80s films, see physical, tangible objects being manipulated and see it as more fun," reasons Chiodo, who reminds us that *Stranger Things* sampled music from *Killer Klowns* in season three. "I think '80's traditional effects are coming back, and that's another reason why the film might be more enjoyable today."

people in clown costumes, and that was not what we had intended."

After viewing the film for the first time, Stephen's fatigue clouded his opinion of the finished product: "All I saw were mistakes, errors and missed opportunities," he recalls. "I think the cast may have felt a little embarrassed about saying some of the lines in the over-the-top way we wanted them to."

However, over time, the elements he was worried about soon became the very reason audiences gravitated towards the picture. "Now we go to conventions with the cast, talk to fans and they really love the characters and performances. The actors were playing these people in absurd situations and I think they get it now. They're pleased and surprised at the affection we get from fans about the movie."

Over time, both its cast and creators started to get a clearer understanding of just how deeply ingrained these Killer Klowns were in the lives of viewers across the world. "The level that it has affected audiences and the love and memories they have wrapped up into this movie has really surprised us," continues Stephen. "We've heard so many stories about family members and friends coming together around this film. We once heard about a young man who had a strained relationship with his father but they watched *Killer Klowns* together and that was their common bond. It was what brought them together."

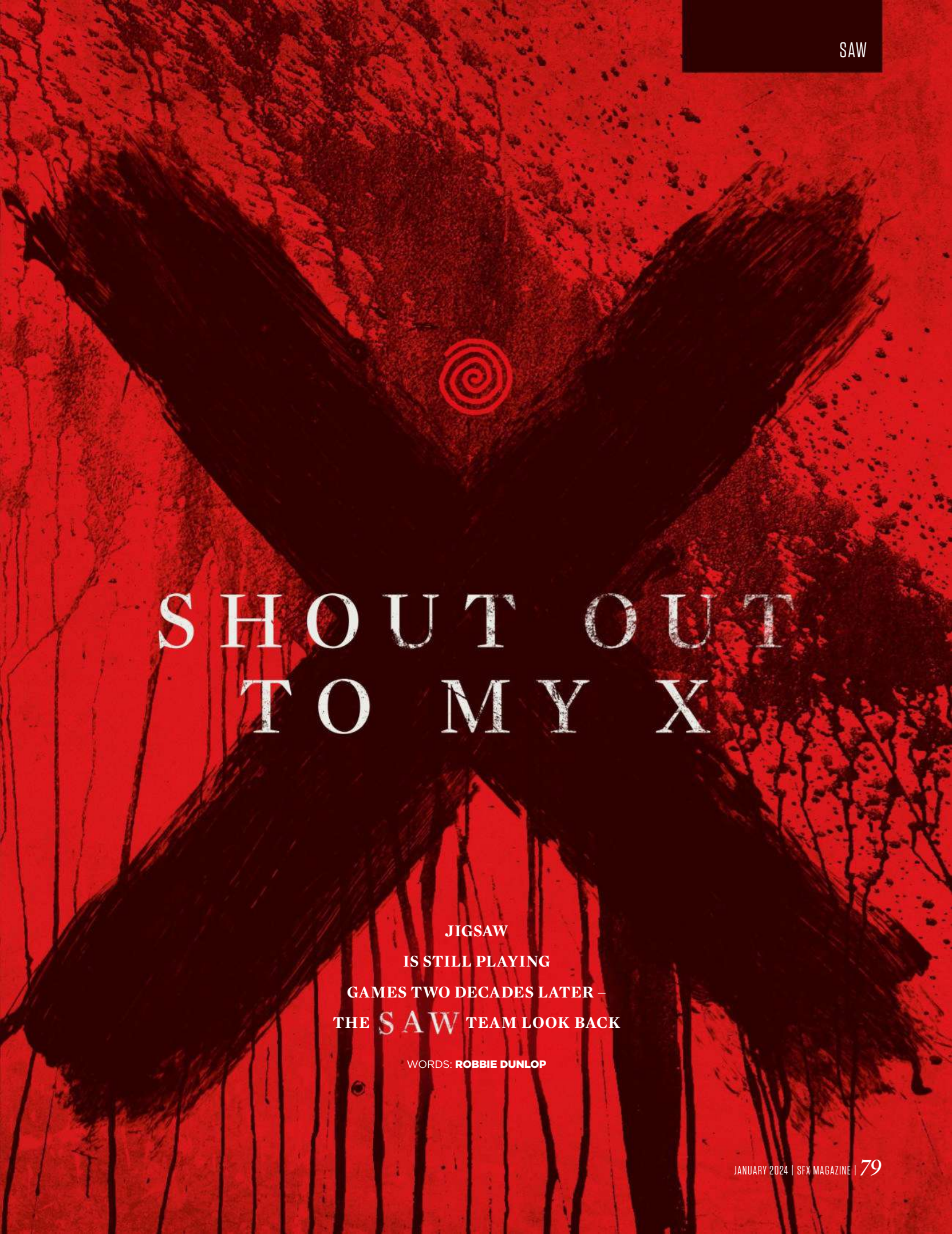
Grant has had similar experiences: "We've had couples come up and say they fell in love through their mutual love of *Killer Klowns*," he smiles. "We're multi-generational now too. People tell us their grandfather turned their dad onto it and their dad turned it onto them. It's been a wild ride to be part of its trajectory to becoming this phenomenal cult status. It just keeps on growing."

Despite this snowballing fanbase, a sequel to *Killer Klowns From Outer Space* has yet to receive the green light – although not through a lack of trying. For years, the Chiodos and Cramer, now a movie producer with films like Nicolas Cage's *Willy's Wonderland* under his belt, have been working on a legacy sequel.

Unfortunately, a rights issue prevented this project from moving forward, but Stephen and his siblings remain undeterred. "My goal is to do an eight-part miniseries for streamers," he tells *SFX*. "We've got a great concept that continues the story of our main characters.

"We'll follow a new group of teenagers who come upon the clowns and meet a drunk living in his van – it's Mike Tobacco. There's a big invasion and we end up on the clown planet. We have lots of great ideas about where this universe goes," he grins. "You haven't even seen the clown animals on the clown planet yet. There's a whole world of things that we have in mind!"

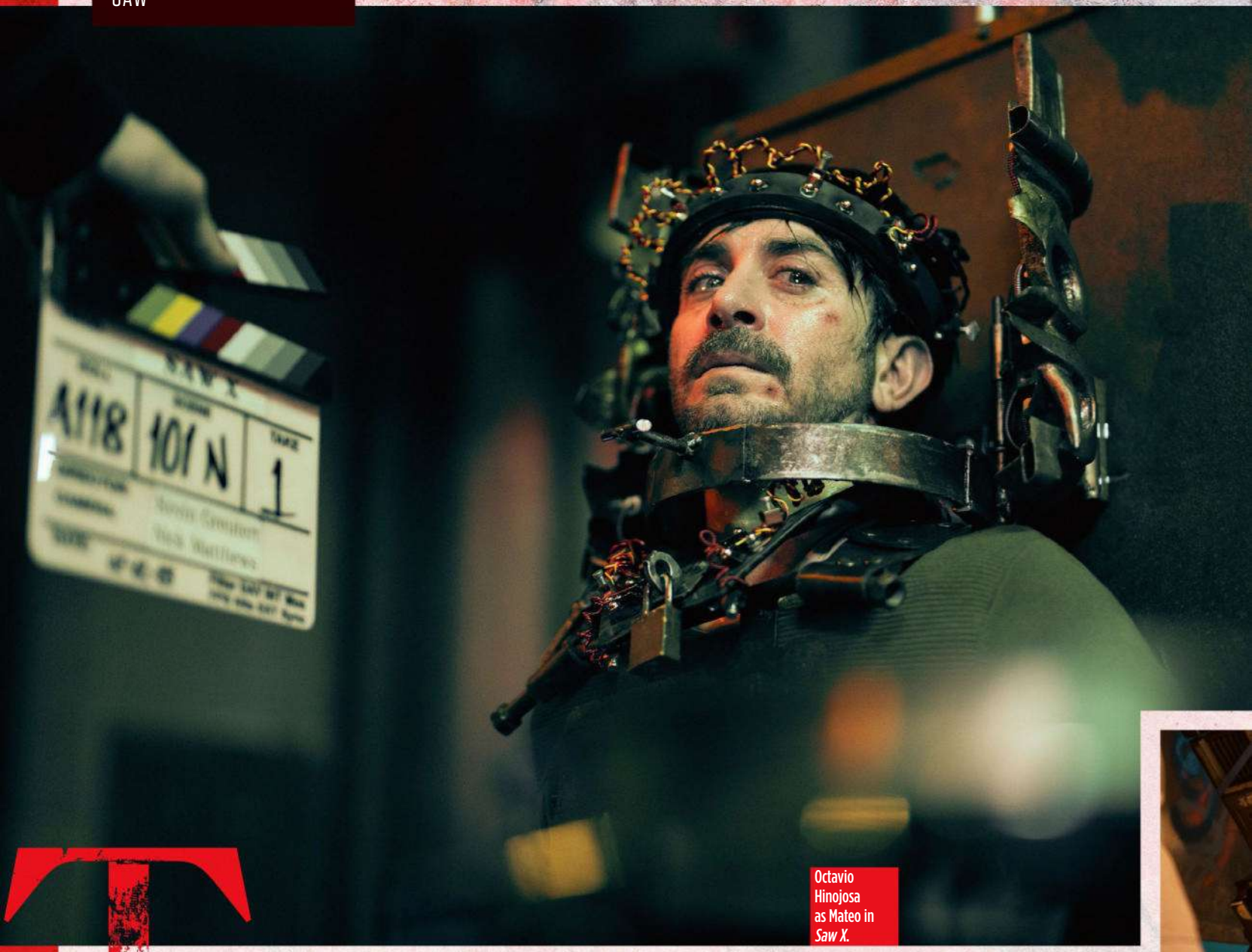
Killer Klowns From Outer Space is available on Blu-ray.



SHOUT OUT TO MY X

JIGSAW IS STILL PLAYING GAMES TWO DECADES LATER – THE SAW TEAM LOOK BACK

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**



Octavio Hinojosa as Mateo in *Saw X*.

TWENTY YEARS AGO, DR LAWRENCE Gordon took a hacksaw and preceded to free himself from an ankle shackle chaining him to a dilapidated bathtub.

It was a bloody victory for both Gordon and his sadistic captor John Kramer, the Jigsaw killer. Kramer's twisted games have since inspired nine sequels, videogames, escape rooms and even a theme park ride.

To celebrate the milestone anniversary of the first *Saw* movie and the recent box office success of the tenth, *Saw X*, *SFX* joined three of the franchise's lead creatives – producers Mark Burg and Oren Koules, and editor/director Kevin Greutert – to talk about Jigsaw's past, present and future.

"We're all a little shocked we're here – in a good way," says Koules. "Mark and I are stunned that..."

"...20 years later we're still making *Saw* movies," Burg finishes. "It's kind of surreal to be looking back on it," says Greutert. *Saw* marked the directorial debut of James Wan (*The Conjuring*, *Aquaman*). The entire movie was filmed in a converted warehouse in Los Angeles in 2003.

"They shot in chronological order," Greutert notes, "all the bathroom material first. The first day's dailies came in and you could tell it was cool, right there. It instilled a sense of dread in the audience, even from the raw footage.

"I didn't think it was going to be a big hit," he admits, "but I was very relieved that I'd signed up for something for four months which was at least going to be of high quality, even if it didn't get a notable release."

According to Greutert the response from the sound team to a screening of a rough cut was the first indication that they were onto a winner. "At the end when you see Jigsaw stand up, James poked me with his elbow and pointed to one of the assistant editors, whose jaw was hanging down onto his chest. He was so amazed and terrified at that moment. That was when we said, 'Wow, this is actually really effective.'"

Saw's premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2004 proved an instant hit. "I was like, oh my god, people are actually really, really liking this," Burg recalls. "Prior to that we hadn't shown it to anybody."

The overwhelmingly positive audience response led to the movie's acquisition by distributor Lionsgate. It went on to gross $103.9 million worldwide – a hugely profitable return on its $1-2 million budget.

Jigsaw came, he saw(ed), and then he conquered. Quite the miracle considering that he was killed in *Saw III*, back in 2006. "Live or die?", Jigsaw threatened his victims. Have the producers come to regret *their* choice?

"I don't know," Koules muses.

"If we had to do it again, we might have kept him alive," suggests Burg.

"But I mean, listen," Koules continues, "how long can you have your lead with terminal

TWISTED PICTURES, LIONSGATE, ISTOCK

Cary Elwes as Dr Gordon way back in the first film.

No spoilers, but... ah, you know what happens.

Amanda Young (Shawnee Smith).

BRIT HAPPENS

You saw it here first!

"Our first deal with Lionsgate had no print and ad guarantee," says Burg. "It truly was the UK that made *Saw* work. They changed the date in the United States to move it back to Halloween, but the distributor in the UK couldn't because the theatres were booked. So the UK was the first country in the world to release *Saw*.

"It was only because it was a success that Lionsgate in America decided to spend print and ad money and release the movie theatrically. We love the UK because had it not been for the people there and the response they gave *Saw*, it probably would have had a limited release or gone straight to DVD.

"I don't think we'd be talking to you if it wasn't for the UK – honestly."

Tobin Bell is back as John Kramer in *Saw X*.

"Dear diary: I ripped another head off today."

cancer be alive?" "Correct," says Burg. "If we did it again, he might not have had terminal cancer."

"Yeah, we might have toned that down a little bit, at the beginning," Koules agrees.

Flashbacks enabled Jigsaw to influence events in later movies from beyond the grave. But a brand study conducted by production company Twisted Pictures while developing *Saw X* informed them that for many fans that just wasn't enough. "People wanted [Jigsaw actor] Tobin Bell," says Burg. "They wanted him to be way more active. The only way we could do that was to set the time period when he was still alive."

Saw X sees a post-*Saw*, pre-*Saw II* Jigsaw travel to Mexico to undergo a risky, experimental cancer treatment offered by one Dr Cecilia Pederson, only to discover that her clinic is a scam...

It will all end in tears for the con artists. On the other hand, 81-year-old Bell is, by all accounts, having the time of his life. Greutert: "He's very stern about making sure that we respect the character and acknowledge that he's not a murderer; that he's got his own agenda and it's a valid behaviour for the character."

"Tobin's very much into the reasoning," offers Burg. "He analyses the script and goes, 'Would my character say this, would he have done that?' He pretty much writes his own dialogue for every movie – he adapts it to what he thinks is best. The one thing Oren and I have learned through the years is that he's always right."

"He's the voice of John Kramer," says Greutert, "but he's also the voice in terms of the words that the man says, and that's pretty amazing.

"I can even say," he continues, "particularly in the first third of this film, when you're seeing this very fragile man make this journey to try and save his life, that I see Tobin more than the character. I don't think he would consider himself a method actor per se, but at the same time the more of the real Tobin that he allows himself to reveal, the better the character gets. That's why Kramer's kind of sympathetic even though he's doing very bad things."

LET'S GET PHYSICAL

For many *Saw* fans it's not only Jigsaw's gory death traps that pull them back to each new movie. It's the twisty-turny, character-driven storylines developed between Burg, Koules and the writers. "We have to make sure that we haven't screwed up any timelines, because it's such a complicated series with 10 movies now," says Koules. "So we double-check, making sure relationships are correct time-wise. We don't write the traps at that point. We put 'Insert Trap' at the beginning."

A particularly vomit-inducing (or cheer-provoking – we see you at the back!) trap in *Saw X* sees the unfortunate Valentina sawing off her leg, before being decapitated by a wire saw. "We like to try and outdo ourselves," Greutert laughs. "It took a while to get the →

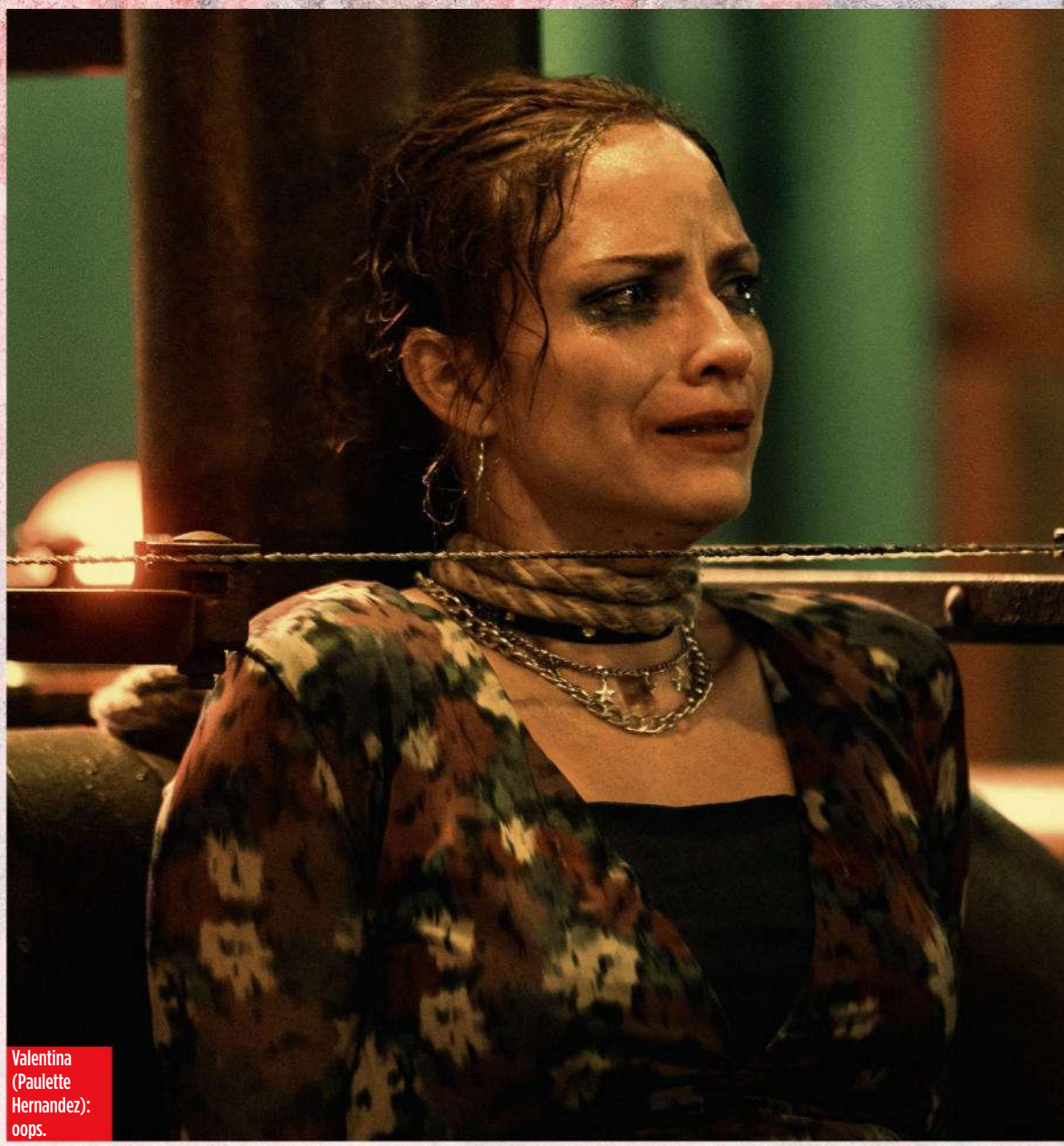
TO 3D OR NOT TO 3D?

That is the question

"I thought maybe it would be cool to do *Saw VI* in 3D," says Greutert, "so I did all my homework." But, after meetings with camera companies and watching 3D demos, he changed his mind. "3D works best when it's a wide-angle lens and there's minimal editing. Every time you make an edit the eye has to adjust, so the kind of editing and compositions and lens lengths that I wanted to use were completely incompatible with that. So I never even mentioned to any of the producers or the studio that we should do it in 3D.

"Lo and behold, once we were only a month out from shooting, they said they wanted to do a conversion on it. I was not happy about that choice. In the end I was saved because the company said they wouldn't have time to do it."

Greutert went on to direct *Saw 7* in 3D. "3D was the rage for that moment in 2010," says Koules. "It was our most expensive movie and by far our biggest challenge in shooting. It worked financially for us at the box office, but I don't think it's our finest hour. It was hard. We were trying to put a square peg in a round hole."



Valentina (Paulette Hernandez): oops.

R rating [15 in the UK] on this film" – as opposed to the much more restrictive NC-17 (18), which is box-office poison.

"They're like your kids," says Burg, when asked to pick his favourite trap. "You kind of love them all and one day you may like one more than the other, but you never stop loving your kids. Shawnee [Smith, playing Amanda] and the needle pit [in *Saw II*] is a classic that everybody seems to love."

"Mine is the Shawnee head trap," says Koules of the reverse bear trap, a mechanical contraption that would have ripped Amanda's jaw open had she not unlocked it in time. "We were tight with money shooting the movie," Koules continues, "and I ended up being the guy on the floor that Shawnee takes the key out of his stomach and uses it to get out of the trap. I'm the one on the floor that she's stabbing. There's a quick flash of me moaning that I'm alive, which makes it more gruesome."

For Greutert, an effective gore sequence relies on an actor who can convince the audience of the unimaginable torture they're experiencing. "If [their performance] doesn't work then nothing works, right?

"Sometimes the actor is a big enough name that you simply make an offer to them, show them the script, and they say yes or no. In the case of *Saw X*, almost everybody who was in a trap had to audition for it.

"The people that we wound up selecting did such a great job in their multiple auditions that I went in very confident that each of them would be able to sell that intensity and that fear that in my opinion makes the trap scenes really stand out."

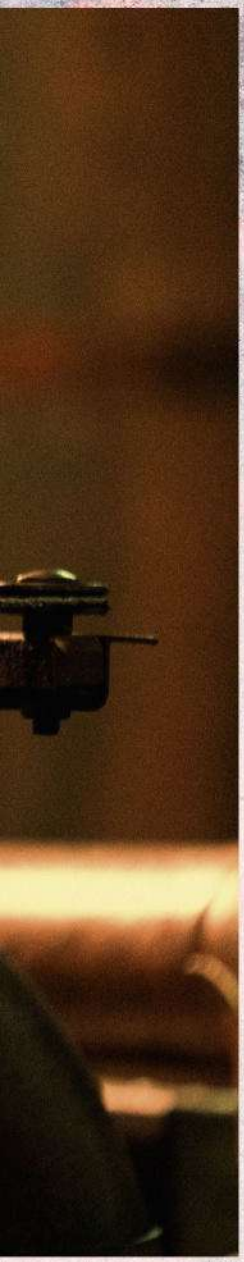
Greutert looked for actors who could convey three things: "How the character comes across as a supposed medical professional; how they come off as an underworld criminal type which they're revealed to be; and then how they can pantomime what they'll be experiencing when they're in the traps."

Just how *do* you audition somebody who's got to, say, amputate their leg? "Often they'll

Amanda Young in the head trap in *Saw*...

...and in the pit of needles in *Saw II*. Give her a break!

ALAMY



TRAPPED AIR

...and breathe

At the end of *Saw X*, a chemical gas is pumped into the clinic, forcing survivors Cecilia and Parker to fight to breathe through a ventilation hole large enough for only one of them. Every *Saw* trap evolves out of discussions between the writers, producers and production designers. Like many other traps, elements of the climax changed in development.

"In the original script they were in a water treatment plant, in a room that was filling with water," says Greutert. "They had to fight to stick their heads through a hole that was in the ceiling, so one would drown and the other wouldn't. But it was just not practical on our budget to pull off a stunt like that."

Amanda and John are the best of pals now.

Synnøve Macody Lund as Cecilia Pederson...

...and Gabriela (Renata Vaca) are both in *Saw X*.

"It's exhausting to audition 20 or 30 people in a day and have them do all this screaming"

just be sitting in a chair," Greutert begins to explain, "like in the case of Mateo [whose head was incinerated by an iron maiden-like contraption]. Maybe we'll put a belt around their head so they'll have something physical to play against.

"And then I'll just talk them through it: 'You've got to grab the bone saw and pick it up, you try it and it hurts and you pull it away.' You do that multiple times. I tell you, it's exhausting to audition sometimes 20 or 30 people in a day and have them do all this screaming. But you have to do it because even if you're a really good actor, you're not necessarily good at screaming and seeming really terrified, especially for the four males that are in the trap scenes in this movie. It's a lot of work."

Fully testing the props is also key to filming an effective death scene. "It all comes down to preparation and trying to anticipate everything that could go wrong," Greutert explains. "And a lot of stuff goes wrong anyway.

"Particularly, any time you see a manacle on a character, those have to be comfortable. They're just made of foam and so they break all the time! We've had some slowdowns because of that. But we were aware of it and had backups!"

Over the last 20 years the *Saw* movies have built up a huge following, with some fans attaching themselves to certain characters... quite literally, in some cases. "There's a bunch of Billy the Puppet tattoos on peoples' bodies, running around across the world," laughs Burg.

"I'm pretty private, and so is Mark, on social media," notes Koules, "but [*Saw X* writer] Josh Stolberg and [*Saw II* director] Darren Lynn Bousman are active, so they send us the crazier ones. I've seen a couple of 'Live or Die' quotes. It's very cool.

"Mark and I, we don't ever, ever take anything for granted," Koules continues. "We do every single thing we can to support the fans. Like in story meetings. We've started story meetings for *Saw XI* and we always talk about the fans, what the fans say – and what the critics say."

"We listen," says Burg.

So, when will it be time for *Jigsaw Goes to Space*...? "I think we'd do *Jigsaw Gets A Time Machine* before that," laughs Greutert. "As long as it feels grounded and real. I'm just kidding!

"It's very hard when we have to figure out the next movie," he says, when asked how the franchise might develop.

"We really struggled in previous films because John Kramer had to be brought back for flashbacks, and we had to come up with characters that were supposed to substitute for him, and that just never worked as well as any of us would have liked. We're trying to figure out what the next one will be."

Saw X has a few loose ends. "Cecilia is still alive," notes Koules, "and Tobin and Shawnee are in a foreign country still. So that, to me, would be the natural place to take at least the next one."

In recent years, a number of horror franchises have successfully transitioned to television. While there are currently no plans for a Jigsaw series, Koules isn't closed to the idea. "Our box office has done so well that if we did a television show it would be a departure, I think, from these storylines. It wouldn't be like 'Tobin's on television'. It would be completely different."

As for 2021 spin-off *Spiral*: "Maybe one day we'll come back to doing a sequel," says Burg. "Chris Rock would love to do one, but our focus, because of the success and the response to *Saw X*, is *Saw XI*." Game over? It's only just begun.

Saw X is on digital services, 4K UHD, Blu-ray and DVD now.

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

NED BEAUMAN

Across the great divide: how a literary novelist won the Clarke Award

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Alice Neale

IT'S NOT THE FIRST TIME THIS HAS HAPPENED... In August 2023, the winner of the Clarke Award was announced. *Venomous Lumpsucker*, Ned Beauman's satirical take on scarcity, selfishness and species extinction, took the gong. It's fair to say a few SF fans will have asked, "Who he?"

The short answer is that Beauman is an acclaimed literary novelist, who made Granta's prestigious Best of Young British Novelists list in 2013. Even in an age when the barriers between publishing genres are far less rigid than in years gone by, he found himself in unfamiliar territory, socially, on the day of the ceremony.

"It was interesting," he says. "I go to books-world stuff semi-frequently, but there wasn't a single person there I knew, apart from my own editor and publisher. It shows that even now the science fiction book world is separate from the literary fiction book world. But it was good to meet some people from the other side, as it were."

Or perhaps not so much from the other side, because *Venomous Lumpsucker* (named after a fictional fish) is the work of a writer steeped in the genre, to the extent that he used to write reviews for *SFX*. "I grew up reading nothing but science fiction," says Beauman, "so I think I have an understanding of the pleasures that people hope to get from a science fiction novel. But I didn't change my style or method at all to write this. I feel like I was combining my primal bank of knowledge with techniques I've developed over the past 15 years of being a literary writer."

BAD CREDIT

However Beauman arrived at this approach, it works brilliantly, in part because, via the notion of "extinction credits", the novel skewers humanity's ongoing ability to fool ourselves that we're tackling an issue when really we're turning a blind eye to what's going on. "Carbon credits were the direct inspiration," says Beauman of a present-day system where companies essentially pay for the right to pollute. "A lot of the most absurd-sounding details in the book about extinction credits are taken directly from that."

A specific inspiration, he adds, was a satirical campaign a few years back called Cheat Neutral, which imagined people funding "monogamy-boosting offset projects" – paying others to stay faithful in order to neutralise their own infidelity. It's an extended gag that flags up why such credits are often compared to Catholic indulgences.

The novel can be read as predictive of what lies immediately ahead – an idea Beauman himself plays with in the text, when he mischievously notes, of ignoring inflation and pinning the Euro to its 2022 value, "This is the sole respect in which the story deviates from how things will actually unfold" – but then, he says, you only have to look around to find ideas such as "diversity banking" or "wetland banking". More prosaically, think of the way developers fell ancient woodlands, but plant trees elsewhere.

In comparison with a novel like M John Harrison's *Light*, which conjures up both exotic space opera vistas and contemporary scenes, Beauman says it's far less of a balancing act setting a work a decade or so in the future. "That's a much stranger and more difficult act of combining literary writing with science fiction," he says. But not one, you'd guess, that'd be beyond Beauman in the years ahead – though his next novel won't, he says, have genre elements.

PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS

To return to the boy who grew up reading SF (and even had a letter published in *SFX*), he also grew up knowing he wanted to be a novelist. That this seemed achievable was in part down to his mother, Nicola Beauman, being a writer – and founder of Persephone Books, which specialises in bringing overlooked books by (mostly) female writers back into print. "I grew up in a home where reading and talking about books were very normal things to do," says Beauman. "Even writing a book was a very normal thing to do."

When the time came to go to university, Beauman studied philosophy at Cambridge. In part, he says, this was because he didn't want to get stuck being forced to read medieval English texts. Then there was the influence of Australian SF writer Greg Egan, whose work "exploded a lot of my assumptions about personhood and consciousness".

Intriguingly, Beauman doesn't see "deep insight and empathy into human behaviour" as one of his strengths as a writer. "Insofar as I have virtues as a novelist," he says, "I think a lot of it has to do with feeling slightly distant from other human beings and the world in general." This connects with studying philosophy, he adds, in that it's a field where you scrutinise the "assumptions" people make – even and perhaps especially those that help us make it through the day.

"I don't have a powerful enough brain any more to read actual philosophy," he says, "but in some feeble sense, I like to think I'm continuing my interest in philosophy with the novels that I write."

Venomous Lumpsucker is published by Sceptre.

BIODATA

From **London**

Greatest Hits
As well as *Venomous Lumpsucker*, Beauman has written four other novels: *Boxer, Beetle* (2010), *The Teleportation Accident* (2012), *Glow* (2014) and *Madness Is Better Than Defeat* (2017).

Random Fact
Beauman has also worked as a screenwriter, but he's still waiting to see a first script make it into production.

> “I grew up in a home where reading and talking about books were very normal things”

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JAN 2024

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edited by Ian Berriman

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WONKA

Just the (golden) ticket

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

PG | 116 minutes

Director **Paul King**

Cast **Timothée Chalamet, Calah Lane, Olivia Colman, Hugh Grant**

Gene Wilder was, and always will be, the best Willy Wonka. It doesn't matter how kookily Johnny Depp played him in 2005's *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory*, and the appealing winsomeness of Timothée Chalamet as the young Willy in this prequel isn't enough. The man we met in 1971's *Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory* is the GOAT. The very idea that someone could top Gene's genie is almost insulting.

And yet... as you've probably gathered from the star rating above, the Wonka we meet in *Wonka* is still bloody brilliant. Much of this boils down to the jaunty script penned by *Paddington* miracle-workers Simon Farnaby and Paul King (who also directs). But Chalamet is also surprisingly at ease in a role that, at first glance, might not have seemed a good fit for him.

Sure, he doesn't have Wilder's manic, occasionally dangerous twinkle – not yet, anyway; if there's a sequel to this prequel, we may see him go darker – but he does have likeability, an endearing physicality and even a decent singing voice (The Divine Comedy's Neil Hannon provides the tunes, and jolly good fun they are, too).

We open with Wonka arriving in an unnamed European town after years spent sailing around the world and perfecting his magical chocolate. He now has one mission: to open a chocolate shop in honour of his late mother (Sally Hawkins).

Unfortunately for him, the city is controlled by a shadowy chocolate cabal run by local businessmen Slugworth (Paterson Joseph), Fickelgruber (Matthew Baynton) and Prodnose (Matt Lucas). When he's not falling foul of their attempts to thwart his new venture, Wonka must also deal with a pair of con artists, Mrs Scrubbit (Olivia Colman) and Mr Bleacher (Tom Davis), who trick him into servitude at their hotel.

Wonka feels as though it could happily sit in the *Paddington* universe; it has the same sense of humour, the same sweet daftness. But there are flashes of Roald Dahl's familiarly disturbing themes too. Nowhere is this more on display than with Colman's Mrs Scrubbit, a hilarious mixture of totally mundane landlady – all sweet smiles and aching politeness – and child-hating monster. The object of her scorn is little orphan Noodle (Calah Lane, excellent), who Wonka soon befriends. A perfect, wide-eyed foil for his magical schemes, Noodle helps Wonka to sell his chocolate without being caught.

"I... can't... breathe! Help me, dammit! HELP ME."

"Cor blimerly, Meary Poppins!" "Sshh."

> **Feels as though it could sit in the Paddington universe**

There's much, much more to enjoy, including a dodgy vicar (Rowan Atkinson on fine gurning form), a crowd of chocoholic monks, a corrupt police chief (Keegan Michael-Key) whose waistline expands as the film progresses and, in one lovely scene, giraffe-milking (!). And then, of course, there is Hugh Grant's Oompa-Loompa.

It really shouldn't work. What possessed him to take on such an embarrassing role? But the same could have been said for his Phoenix Buchanan in *Paddington 2*, another masterclass in subverting our expectations of

Grant and his capacity for self-ridicule. The resulting orange-skinned performance is a triumph, albeit a tiny one.

There's a lot stuffed into *Wonka*, then. You could argue that it all becomes just a little tiring by the end; snipping 15 to 20 minutes could have helped younger viewers keep their bums on cinema seats without wriggling. But that would have been a shame. Farnaby and King's whimsical worldbuilding is so exquisite that to lose anything would be a crime – even background characters get little arcs, and the plot is stacked together so intricately that it would topple like a pile of Cadbury's Chocolate Fingers if one element was removed.

The more pedantic among us might wonder why we're introduced to a fully formed chocolatier who's simply looking for a shop to sell his wares. Surely the *real* story lies in how Wonka picked up his skills in the first place? How can he produce hot chocolate from his hat? How many attempts did it take for his sweets to make people fly?

On this front, director Paul King has pointed out that he sees Wonka as rather like Mozart: arriving fully formed and composing symphonies aged five (only this time they're in chocolate). Perhaps there is no "prequel" to this character, then. He always was, and always will be, Wonka, whether he's Timothée Chalamet or Johnny Depp or, indeed, the Wonka we read in the book as kids. Either way, they're all enjoyable.

But Gene Wilder did it best.

Jayne Nelson

i In one scene, Wonka and Noodle swim in a vat of chocolate. It was real hot chocolate, warmed for the actors' comfort.

SWEET DREAMS

More fantastical confectionery

Toot sweets

In Ian Fleming's *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, inventor Caractacus Pott buys the flying car with the profits from his Crackpot Whistling Sweets. The movie renames them "Toot sweets" ("The candies you whistle, the whistles you eat!"). Unfortunately, the sound they make also attracts dogs...

Secrets

Written by Michael Palin and Terry Jones, the 1973 TV play "Secrets" centres on a chocolate factory where three workers falls into a mixing vat. The taste of human flesh proves profitably popular... The company eventually comes clean, and persuades the public to donate their bodies for flavouring!

Fondant surprise

'80s *Doctor Who* "The Happiness Patrol" boasts a bizarre state executioner: the Bertie Bassett-esque Kandy Man, who makes "sweets so delicious the human physiology is not equipped to bear the pleasure". But the severest penalty is being smothered by fondant. Ooh.

Chocolate frogs

Cockroach Clusters, Ice Mice, Pepper Imps, Exploding Bonbons – there's no end of strange sweets in the *Harry Potter* universe, all easily acquired via a trip to Honeydukes. We recommend passing on Every Flavour Beans, unless you actually *like* the taste of earwax.

WARNER BROS, BBC, UNITED ARTISTS

THE BOY AND THE HERON

SFX Loves

A Miyazaki masterclass

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 124 minutes

Director **Hayao Miyazaki**

Cast **Soma Santoki, Masaki Suda, Ko Shibasaki, Aimyon**

Ostensibly the final film of Hayao Miyazaki, the 82-year-old animation director who co-founded Studio Ghibli, *The Boy And The Heron* opens in Tokyo, 1943, as American bombs turn the city into a frenzy of fear and flame.

Mahito, a young boy voiced by Soma Santoki, fights through the chaos, the crowds blurring into an expressionistic blaze of panic, to find his mother dead. It's an astonishingly animated sequence: so elegant and alive, so vivid and visceral – the work of a master at the peak of his powers.

The grieving Mahito is soon moved to the countryside. There is no safety, however. The titular heron – a menacing, grotesque creation whose voice is guttural and grim – lures him into a spiritual world populated by the starving dead and the not yet born.

It is a plot reminiscent of Miyazaki's 2001 film *Spirited Away*, although this is a far darker and challenging prospect: a realm full of rules you're not privy to, full of characters and ideas that are as compelling as they are unknowable. In any other director's hands, such loose, enigmatic plotting could prove unsatisfying. Yet the sheer ferocity of Miyazaki's imagination is electrifying. There are images here that are as breathtaking as anything he has drawn in the rest of his career.

> **"The heron is menacing and grotesque"**

"You'd best hope I don't get a cold, pal."

Late in the film, an old man asks Mahito to take over this incredible world he has created, lest it all vanishes forever. The boy's refusal suggests Miyazaki reckoning with mortality, and the wonders that will be lost when he finally retires for good. **Stephen Kelly**

ℹ According to Studio Ghibli producer Toshio Suzuki, Hayao Miyazaki has already started work on a new film...

POOR THINGS

The Stone Rises

★★★★½

RELEASED 12 JANUARY

12A | 141 minutes

Director **Yorgos Lanthimos**

Cast **Emma Stone, Willem Dafoe, Mark Ruffalo, Ramy Youssef**

A feminist *Frankenstein* from the director of *The Favourite*, Yorgos Lanthimos's latest is one of the most fiercely inventive films you'll see this year. Adapted from Scottish writer Alasdair Gray's 1992 novel, *Poor Things* is a Victorian-era morality tale that's far more bonkers and fun than that sounds.

Right from the off, Lanthimos and his collaborators do everything in their power to bend the rules – from Jerskin Fendrix's scratchy, abrasive score to cinematographer Robbie Ryan's loopy fisheye lens camerawork. The plot sees one Dr Godwin Baxter (Willem Dafoe), the archetypal mad scientist, rescue a suicide victim (Emma Stone) moments after she plunges to her death. Re-animating her, he brings her back home to rear like a surrogate daughter, naming her Bella.

Gradually, this curious creature learns to walk (erratically) and talk (with zero filter), which results in some amusing physical and verbal comedy from Stone, as Bella flips the bird at polite Victorian society.

As Bella swiftly learns about sexual pleasure (or "furious jumping", as she terms it), she takes agency over her body and her mind, in spite of the attentions of some very different men (Ramy Youssef's naïve student; Mark Ruffalo's silky-slick lawyer). Screenwriter Tony McNamara truly gets a handle on Gray's playful and bawdy language, while Lanthimos revels in creating a dreamlike feel, one that makes full use of imaginatively designed sets.

While all the cast have a ball, Stone is streets ahead, with a dextrous, daring performance – one that could so easily have flopped with a less skilled performer. With heavy shades of fantasy – Godwin even has crazed animal experiments wandering around his lab – the result is a riotously entertaining poke at the sterility of most period dramas, which offers a vengeful swipe at the patriarchy. There's nothing poor about this.

James Mottram

"'Come to Hull, it's lovely in summer,' they said."

ℹ Selected costumes from Poor Things are on display at London's Barbican Centre (in the Level G foyer), until 19 January.

THE END WE START FROM

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 19 January
12A | 106 minutes
Director **Mahalia Belo**
Cast **Jodie Comer, Katherine Waterston, Joel Fry, Benedict Cumberbatch**

Adapted from Megan Hunter's 2017 novel, this debut feature from Mahalia Belo is an unusually intimate post-apocalyptic drama, favouring the sensory and the tactile over spectacle and set-pieces.

The ever-impressive Jodie Comer is Mother. We meet her when she's heavily pregnant, her waters breaking as flood water breaches the London home she shares with R (Joel Fry). An environmental crisis submerges London, and the couple flee with their newborn to R's parents' place in the country. It's the start of a perilous journey that takes in a government shelter, an island commune and a brief meeting with the film's producer, Benedict Cumberbatch.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is the obvious comparison point, albeit given a British sensibility and a female spin – Mother meets another new mum, O (Katherine Waterson), in a shelter, and Belo's film finds hope in female solidarity.

Indeed, the entire film is filtered through the bubble of motherhood. It's filmed almost entirely in close-ups and medium shots; we get a sense of, but rarely see, the dire bigger picture. Low-key and bleak, *The End We Start From* is not without hope, though, as it celebrates the indomitable human spirit.

Jamie Graham

FREAKS VS THE REICH

★★★★½

RELEASED 12 January
15 | 141 minutes
Director **Gabriele Mainetti**
Cast **Aurora Giovinazzo, Franz Rogowski, Claudio Santamaria, Pietro Castellitto**

Ignore the tacky title. This bewitching Italian fantasy skews more towards *Pan's Labyrinth* and *The City Of Lost Children* than kitsch fare such as *Strippers Vs Werewolves*.

We're in the heart of the Second World War, where Franz, a Nazi officer with the power to see the future, is hunting a troupe of fugitive circus performers, hoping their uncanny abilities – essentially they're carny X-Men – will save Germany from defeat.

Director Gabriele Mainetti immediately delivers a statement of intent. No sooner do our misfit heroes dazzle a crowd than a bombing raid tears their circus tent apart, hurling us from whimsy to real-world carnage.

It's an audacious gear-shift, and as Mainetti takes us across a devastated Europe he continues to balance comedy and darkness, blending moments of wonder with visceral action sequences that remind you this is, at its core, a war movie – one that builds to a properly barnstorming climax.

There are echoes of everything from *Schindler's List* to *Salon Kitty*, even a pinch of Terry Gilliam in the mix. But powered by Aurora Giovinazzo's resonant turn as a self-loathing Electric Girl, it finds its own, inventive groove. A true tonic for superhero fatigue. **Nick Setchfield**

RAGING GRACE

★★★★☆

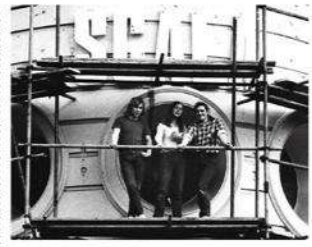
RELEASED 29 December
15 | 100 minutes
Director **Paris Zarcilla**
Cast **Max Eigenmann, Jaeden Boadilla, Leanne Best, David Hayman**

While the world is not exactly crying out for more horror films infused with social commentary, writer/director Paris Zarcilla's feature debut manages to feel like a fresh new entry in what's become an overcrowded field.

It places undocumented Filipina immigrant Joy (Max Eigenmann) in a gothic house of horrors when she accepts a housekeeping job at the rickety estate of Mr Garrett (David Hayman), who is immobilised by terminal illness. His niece Katherine (Leanne Best) flits in and out of the palatial home, but provides Joy with an oppressive set of rules. To make matters worse, Joy has to make sure they don't discover that her daughter Grace (Jaeden Paige Boadilla) is accompanying her on the job.

The film speaks to the power dynamics and pressures facing immigrants like Joy, but thankfully does not get bogged down in them. Instead, it embraces the dark romance of the Garrett home and slowly unveils its secrets. While some of the twists can be seen coming a mile off, the performances – particularly when it comes to Joy's relationship with Grace – are compelling right up until the final moments.

Raging Grace is more spooky than outright terrifying, but unlike so many other "elevated" horror flicks, it seems to love and understand the genre's potential. **Leila Latif**



SCALA!!!

★★★★☆

RELEASED 5 January
18 | 96 minutes
Directors **Jane Giles, Ali Catterall**

Is it possible to have nostalgia for something you never experienced? It's a feeling this documentary love letter to London's most infamous cinema gets close to generating. And even if (like most of us) you didn't live in the capital in the '80s, it may revive fond memories of a dive hangout.

From 1978-1993, initially in Fitzrovia and latterly a grotty King's Cross, the Scala became a magnet for a generation of misfits. Its status as a midnight movie venue made it the perfect home for FrightFest precursor Shock Around The Clock and *The Avengers* conventions. But it was also a place you could discover arthouse obscurities and gay cinema.

The interviewee list here is dominated by "big name" former patrons, including the likes of Adam Buxton, *American Psycho* director Mary Harron and S-Express's Mark Moore. But there are good anecdotes from the staff too, including some rather icky ones about the detritus left behind...

Jam-packed with glorious psychotronic clips, it neatly encapsulates the Scala's ramshackle underground ethos: the cats brushing your shins, the political benefits, the speed-fuelled all-nighters. While you can't quite feel your shoes sticking to the floor, or the Northern Line rumbling under your feet, you do come away with a strong sense of a much-treasured time and place – one infinitely more characterful than today's multiplexes. **Ian Berriman**

"And I spent a bloody quid on that lottery ticket, too."

DOCTOR WHO

SPOILER WARNING!

A big hand for David Tennant

★★★★½

UK **BBC One/iPlayer, streaming now**
Showrunner **Russell T Davies**
Cast **David Tennant, Catherine Tate, Bonnie Langford, Ncuti Gatwa**

ANNIVERSARY SPECIALS **The** Toymaker may be a stickler for following the rules, but Russell T Davies sure as hell ain't.

There's a mischievousness about his writing which infuriates some and delights others, and the 60th anniversary specials are business as usual for the man who had the Daleks trash-talk the Cybermen, and grew a spare Doctor from a disembodied hand. Nothing is off the table – not even the sort of big, bold ideas which would once have been dismissed as fan-fiction fodder. It makes for excitingly unpredictable viewing.

Thankfully, these specials don't get too bogged down in continuity. An odd statement considering that they bring back the 2008 TARDIS team and a companion last seen in 1987 (turns out Bonnie Langford can really act, given a decent script), adapt a 1980 comic, and revive a villain from 1966. But fan wishlists run to several yards in anniversary years, and with old Doctors shuffled off to iPlayer, Davies can concentrate on telling stories, not parades of cameos.

They look so *expensive* too, splashing the Disney+ cash. Vintage fans may briefly fret that the series is embracing gigantism for gigantism's sake. Then you remember the days of make do and mend, and laugh off such asceticism. The fact that *Doctor Who* is now a series which can *show off* its budget, rather than try to hide it, takes some getting used to. But once you do, every flipping UNIT jeep or ambitious CG effect feels like a triumph you are sharing in. It's like your League One team has risen to the Prem. (Note: this is a football reference.)

In following Chris Chibnall as showrunner, Davies had two niche constituencies on tenterhooks. Anyone foolish enough to have banked on a retreat from social issues will have had a rude awakening, with a trans character foregrounded and disabled access discussed. Donna's daughter Rose won't change the opinion of adults with entrenched positions on gender identity, but if it makes teens pause before bullying a classmate, that's a good thing.

Davies also pens the world's first *actually funny* joke about preferred pronouns, and portrays a grandparent struggling with new terms sympathetically – a courtesy not always extended in our age of self-righteous denunciation.

Meanwhile, anyone hoping that Chibnall's Timeless Child continuity would be left stuffed in a deep hole has mixed luck: it's acknowledged and discussed, but the possibility is teased that it was all just the Toymaker messing with our hero. Everyone wins!

Davies delivers everything a fan of his era would be hoping for: heartfelt emotion, cheeky humour, and an anything-goes approach. "The Star Beast" is a delight, an action–packed, fun-for-all-the-family adventure which does fan-favourite furball the Meep justice: it looks and sounds perfect, particularly in pointy-fanged evil bastard mode.

"Wild Blue Yonder" – essentially a mashup of Davies's "Midnight" with *Solaris* – is an eerie mystery, twice as intriguing for being kept under wraps. Finally, "The Giggle" – as out-and-out fantastical as the series has ever got – is a carnival of delights, from its creepy human puppets to Neil Patrick Harris's delicious dominance-display dancing (see you and raise you, John Simm's Master).

For many, the jaw-dropping "bi-generation" will be a stumbling block. But we've seen Tennant's Doctor die before – twice! So it makes sense to try something new. Giving Fourteen a family life provides a strong rationale for returning to an old face, and is well seeded – in the process, even making 2021's *Flux* arc feel meaningful. You'd be forgiven for having forgotten that it saw half the universe destroyed. One short scene renders that more impactful than six episodes combined.

> **"Provides a strong rationale for returning to an old face"**

There are small things we could quibble with. How can a gaping chasm across London be undone? The idea human fear might facilitate faster copying is fine, but does it follow that the "Not-things" can't understand *any* slow process? A game of catch seems a disappointingly basic means of deciding Earth's fate – one you'd expect a god-like being to win. And aren't there any spare trousers in UNIT HQ?!

But all three episodes are so uproariously imaginative that nitpicking feels churlish. We'd forgotten what it was like to tune into *Doctor Who* at the scheduled time and watch perched on the very edge of our seat. **Ian Berriman**

i The steelworks in "The Star Beast" is called Millson Wagner. The credited writers of the comic were Pat Mills and John Wagner.

GOOSEBUMPS
Season One
Smells Like Teen Spirits

★★★★☆

UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**

Showrunners **Rob Letterman, Nicholas Stoller**

Cast **Zack Morris, Isa Briones, Miles McKenna, Ana Yi Puig**

The teens discover the average price of a house.

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **RL Stine's kids'** horror series *Goosebumps* lends itself to the anthology TV series format, because (barring a few sequels) each book is a standalone story. And that's exactly what the '90s TV adaptation was, with different stories every episode.

This new *Goosebumps* has other ideas – as, indeed, did the 2015 *Goosebumps* film, a bizarrely meta affair with Jack Black as Stine battling his own creations. That was directed by the same man, Rob Letterman, who's one of the main motivating forces behind the series. He hasn't taken the same approach for the small screen, though, instead opting for a serialised format incorporating many of the books' most memorable spooky features (yes, Slappy the dummy and the haunted mask are here!).

The result is a spirited blend of *IT*, *Stranger Things*, *Buffy* and *Runaways*, with a group of misfit teens in smalltown America having to deal with the supernatural fallout of their parents' actions decades before.

"For the first two-thirds of the season it's great fun"

For the first two-thirds of the season it's great fun: witty and tightly written, with just the right balance of teen angst and PG-level supernatural scares. The Stine elements are cleverly woven in rather than feeling too monster-of-the-week, and the diverse and engaging young cast is more than capable of carrying the show. Towards the finale things do go off the boil, with a couple of water-treading episodes followed by a convoluted twist and a lame Big Bad. But you can forgive that, because who wouldn't love a show where evil kids explode into yellow goo? **Dave Golder**

i *Goosebumps* author RL Stine has a vocal cameo in "Night Of The Living Dummy Part 2", as the host of a podcast.

MAYFAIR WITCHES
Season One
If looks could kill

★★☆☆☆

UK **iPlayer, streaming now**

US **AMC+, streaming now**

Showrunners **Michelle Ashford, Esta Spalding**

Cast **Alexandra Daddario, Tongayi Chirisa, Jack Huston, Annabeth Gish**

"I *told* you not to mess with my eBay rating."

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Set in the same** world as *Interview With The Vampire*, *Mayfair Witches* is part of the TV "Anne Rice-verse" we didn't know we wanted... and quite honestly, we still don't know.

Alexandra Daddario stars as the supernaturally gifted Rowan (she can kill with a look – don't piss her off), who searches out her witchy family in New Orleans after discovering that her mother, Deirdre (Annabeth Gish), is still alive. Poor Gish is hampered by having to wear blue contact lenses to ensure she looks like her on-screen daughter: they act her off the screen. Weird eyeballs aside, Deirdre is also being haunted by Jack Huston's devilish Lasher. Is he a ghost? A demon? The Devil?

After Lasher attaches himself to Rowan, the show – which admittedly seems okay for the first two episodes – completely unravels, getting bogged down in a quagmire of disorientating spells, yawn-worthy prophecies and an unsubtle subplot about witch-burning fascists who may as well be yelling "Trump won!"

Occasional flashbacks to *Witchfinder General*-era Scotland are also let down by the cast struggling with Scottish accents that make them sound as though they're wearing crap dentures.

Worst of all, though, is Rowan. Daddario is usually excellent, but all she gets to do here is act twitchy or stunned before crying or screaming. There should be a complicated, sexy bond between Rowan and Lasher, but there's no chemistry at all; indeed, watching her yelling "Go away!" at him over and over again becomes tedious.

The show does sputter into life whenever Tongayi Chirisa's Ciprien is on screen, and the odd plot twist hits a pleasing note. Neither are enough to save this turgid mess of seen-it-all-before supernatural clichés. **Jayne Nelson**

i The Scottish accents were deemed too much for American audiences, and came with subtitles. The BBC left those out.

THE WINTER KING Season One

Monarch Of The Glum

★★★☆☆

UK **ITVX, streaming now**

US **MGM+, streaming now**

Showrunners **Kate Brooke, Ed Whitmore**

Cast **Iain De Caestecker, Stuart Campbell, Ellie James, Jordan Alexandra**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 ***The Winter King*** is based on the *Warlord Chronicles* books by Sharpe creator Bernard Cornwell, and just as Sharpe spent much of his time being reminded he wasn't a proper officer, Arthur in this show is repeatedly told that he can never be a proper king. He's a bastard, y'see. His father might be King Uther Pendragon but his mother is a whore – and worse than that, working class.

If you think you know Arthurian legends, prepare for a very different take (actually, even if you've read *The Warlord Chronicles*, prepare for a very different take – it's far from a faithful adaptation). Cornwell set his tales not in some mystical past of shining armour and courtly knights on fantasy quests, but in a more historically accurate Dark Ages Britain of warring tribes and invading Saxons, where defiant druids faced an existential threat from proselytising Christians and everybody ate mud for breakfast.

This is the story of Arthur trying to unite the tribes of Britain and make sure that his infant brother Mordred – the true heir – has a country to rule when he comes of age. But Merlin has seen visions of the future, and is convinced that Arthur must take the throne for himself if Britain is to survive.

Cornwell also, of course, wrote *The Saxon Stories*, on which *The Last Kingdom* is based. *The Winter King* is clearly aiming for a similar audience, though druids like Merlin and Nimue do add a pleasingly earthy and grounded fantasy element to proceedings. There's gore, there's blood and there's a whole load of politicking, backstabbing and grisly justice.

The cast is solid, with an intriguing central performance from *Agents Of SHIELD*'s Iain De Caestecker as an understated Arthur. It's difficult to work out if he's woefully miscast or a daring piece of casting against type; there are moments where he's utterly magnificent and mesmerising, and others when he's like a bank clerk doing some Arthurian LARPing down the woods at the weekend.

> "Gore, blood and a whole load of politicking"

There's also an odd artifice to the series that works against its attempts to be a down-and-dirty take on the legends. Overdesigned costumes, Arthur and Guinevere's modern haircuts, stagey fight scenes and some fanciful citadel design keep on reminding you that you're watching a TV production.

The series feels strangely timid in places too, with big confrontations that fall flat, battles that never materialise, long-held grudges that fail to pay off, and underwhelming diplomatic solutions. It's mainly left to the druids to inject some memorably icky moments (and the Christians to suffer some grisly *Games Of Thrones*-y deaths).

Of course, some of this may be down to budgetary constraints, but it feels like a lot of it is the result of the lack of a clear vision of what the show should be. **Dave Golder**

"See that baby? One horsepower, that."

i De Caestecker's horse, Shovel, hated boom microphones, refusing to hit his mark when they were in his eyeline.

LOT NO 249

★★★½☆

UK **BBC Two/iPlayer, streaming now**

Writer/director **Mark Gatiss**

Cast **Kit Harington, Freddie Fox, Colin Ryan, John Heffernan**

This year's enjoyable addition to classic strand *A Ghost Story For Christmas* deviates from the norm in two key respects. Firstly, it's one of the rare entries not based on an MR James tale; secondly, there are no ghosts. Arthur Conan Doyle's "Lot No 249" is, instead, a mummy horror, centred on three students – one of whom, it becomes clear, can command an Egyptian relic to bump off those who've wronged him.

Mark Gatiss makes three main changes. For starters, he adds some interesting subtext by rendering the villainous Bellingham explicitly gay. This is not a stretch: the text's repeated references to how he is "not a healthy Johnny" can easily be read as euphemisms. Rather than Doyle's "flabby toad", however, this Bellingham is a seductively louche, Wildean figure; the devilishly pretty Freddie Fox is well cast.

Secondly, he supplants a friend of the protagonist with Doyle's most famous creation... An amusingly cheeky idea, though the effect is distracting, your mind whirring as you strive to slot this cameo into the Great Detective's timeline.

Then there's the conclusion. Gatiss has made an impressive habit of improving upon source material that peters out. The new climax devised here feels a tad too elementary, though. The production also doesn't quite manage to solve another of the story's issues – how can a 6'6" mummy sneak past someone on a narrow staircase? **Ian Berriman**

MONARCH: LEGACY OF MONSTERS

Where be monsters?

★★½☆☆

UK/US **Apple TV+, Fridays**

Showrunner **Chris Black**

Cast **Anna Sawai, Kiersey Clemons, Ren Watabe, Wyatt Russell, Kurt Russell**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **When the BBC** released *The Tripods* in the mid-'80s, the scarcity of actual Tripod sightings was a bone of contention. Nearly four decades later, this TV spin-off from *Godzilla* and *Kong: Skull Island* also struggles to deliver on the gargantuan promise of its title.

With genuine kaiju-on-kaiju action in short supply, *Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters* plays out like *Hollyoaks* with bigger teeth. It's 2015 (a year after Godzilla went on his city-smashing rampage) when two 20-something siblings living in Tokyo and San Francisco respectively are brought together by the sudden death of their bigamist dad. Their hunt for answers leads them to the heart of eponymous monster-hunting outfit Monarch, but it's also an excuse to explore weighty themes such as PTSD, whistleblowing and grief in a very earnest way – if you're expecting an action-heavy rollercoaster ride, you're going to be disappointed. Meanwhile, a parallel '50s/'60s-set storyline reveals how the siblings' grandma – along with Bill Randa, the character played by John Goodman in *Skull Island* – were pivotal in Monarch's formation.

"Yep, it's definitely that guy from *The Thing*."

This globetrotting, timeline-hopping series is simultaneously a sequel to *Godzilla* and an origin story for Monarch itself, then. But seeing as its new mythology comprises the sort of deep cuts that only a serious MonsterVerse aficionado would want to know about, asking you to tune in for 10 episodes feels like a bit of an ask.

When they do cameo, the Titans are every bit as impressive as they were on the big screen. But if *Monarch* is going to successfully roar again, it needs a little less conversation, and a *lot* more monster action.

Richard Edwards

i Wyatt Russell has played a younger version of his dad before: in *Soldier* he was Kurt's character at the age of 11.

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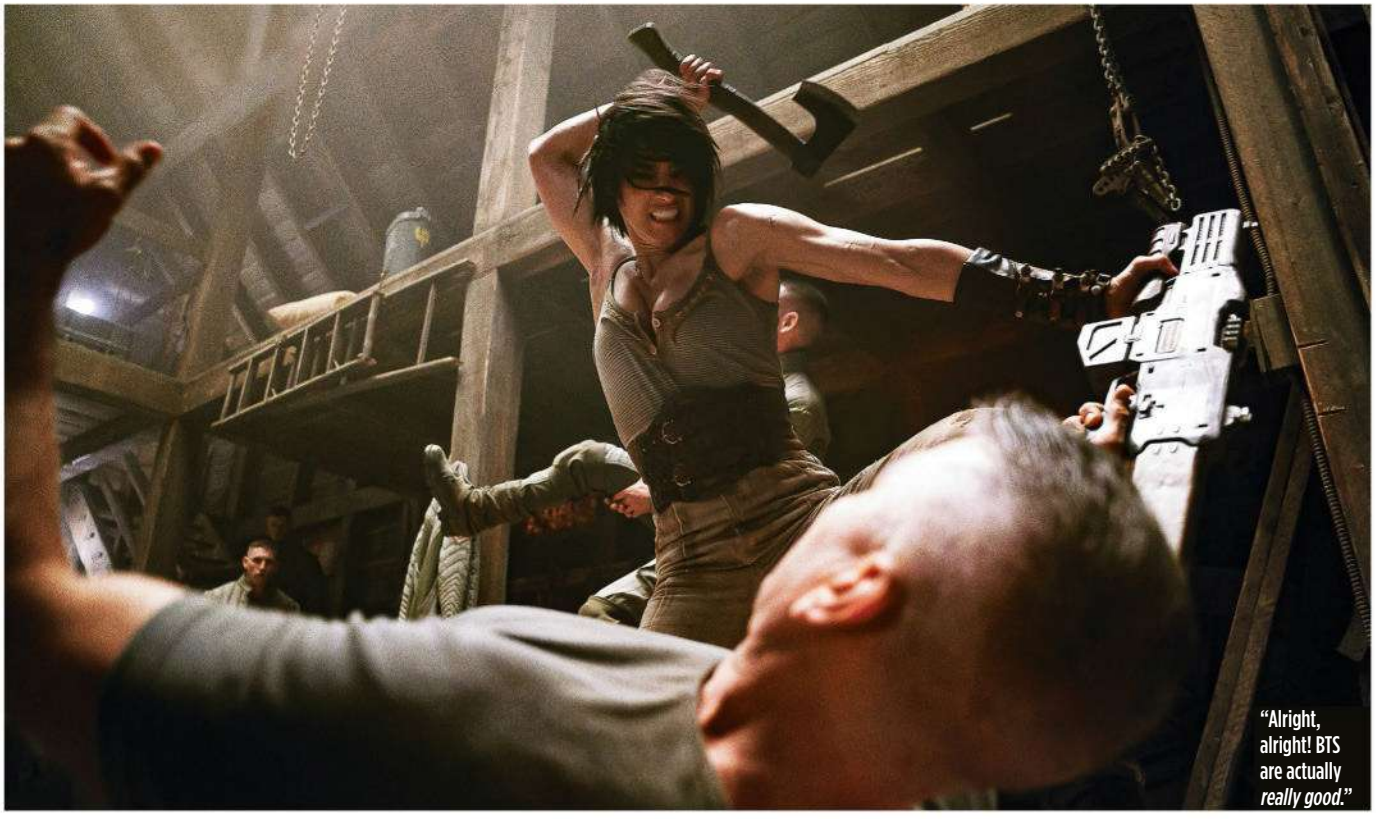


"Alright, alright! BTS are actually *really good.*"

REBEL MOON
PART ONE: A CHILD OF FIRE

We've got a bad feeling about this...

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2023 | 15 | SVOD
Directors **Zack Snyder**
Cast **Sofia Boutella, Ed Skrein, Michiel Huisman, Charlie Hunnam**

NETFLIX **Zack Snyder's epic space** opera doesn't start with a crawl, but a cheesy voiceover. Which, since this has been enthusiastically marketed as "*Star Wars* with sex, violence and swearing" is a bit of a shame; it would have been great to see *Rebel Moon, Part F**king One* scrolling up the screen.

In fact, the sex, violence and swearing elements are all pretty tame. This isn't adult *Star Wars* by any stretch of the imagination. It's more like one of those post-original *Star Wars* knock-offs (*Battle Beyond The Stars*, *Krull*, *Star Crash*), with the benefit of CG effects and the kind of low-rent designer violence that makes frat boys go, "Cool!"

The threadbare plot to this opening entry in an intended franchise is basically *The Magnificent Seven Samurai Beyond The Stars* all over again. There's some backstory about the Empire... sorry, Motherworld and its rulers that'll no doubt be explored in further instalments, but all that really happens here is this: farming planet gets threatened by evil space army, so they send plucky heroine (Sofia Boutella's Kora) on a quest to recruit gnarly warriors to make a stand against their oppressors.

To complain about a lack of story is rather missing the point, though. This is clearly a simple tale designed to introduce you to the universe of *Rebel Moon*. The races, the worlds, the main characters, the weird creatures. There's clearly been a lot of work on world-building here, and a huge amount of effort put into the designs and cultures.

Visually, it reeks of Snyder's trademark mythic aesthetic (yes, there's slow-motion action galore), and there are plenty of evocative images and lively battles. But almost every aspect of the film reminds you of something from somewhere else: a creature from *Star Wars*; a ship from *Terminator*; a scene from *Harry Potter* (hippogriff cameo!); an umbrella from *Blade Runner*; some kinkiness from David Lynch's *Dune*. It's difficult to know if it's homage, pastiche or plagiarism.

All the characters feel like archetypes with just the merest nods towards actual personalities (though Ed Skrein's villainous Atticus Noble has more life than most). And Kora's recruitment process in most cases amounts to, "Wanna come?" "Nah." "Pretty please?" "Oh, alright then."

Often visually stunning, but with a hollow, mechanical heart, *Rebel Moon* has the building blocks of an interesting franchise. So far all it's made out of them, however, is a '60s brutalist multistorey car park. **Dave Golder**

i Ed Skrein and Michiel Huisman not only both appeared in *Game Of Thrones*, they played the same character, Daario Naharis.

THE END OF CIVILIZATION

Opinions, Pole's

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1981-1986 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Piotr Szulkin**

Cast **Jerzy Stuhr, Roman Wilhelmi, Daniel Olbrychski**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Poland isn't known** for sci-fi films, which makes this box set (subtitled *Three Films By Piotr Szulkin*) doubly intriguing. Not that the late director liked the pigeonhole, saying, "I do not make sci-fi, but rather borrow from its aesthetic." In the early '80s, either side of martial law, he used the genre to sneak satire of officialdom past the state's censors.

O-Bi, O-Ba: The End Of Civilization most impresses. Set a year after nuclear war, it depicts a crumbling underground society with a few hundred survivors, many clinging to the false hope of an Ark arriving to transport them to a better life. Here, a raw onion is a luxury, which will have struck a chord with audiences used to queuing for basic provisions.

Hauntingly bleak, it has a singular look: lit in shades of blue, and shot in disused or derelict spaces such as an old electricity plant and the corridors under Warsaw's Palace of Culture and Science. As Jerzy Stuhr's official walks around, encountering characters with a variety of manias, there's little plot to speak of, but plenty of characterful performances.

Despite its opening dedication to Wells (HG) and Welles (Orson), *War Of The Worlds: Next Century* has nothing to do with the novel. Roman Wilhelmi plays a news presenter tasked with reassuring viewers that recently arrived Martians are "our brothers"; in fact, these silver-faced dwarves feed on human blood.

Briefly banned, its fascinating finale sees the hero facing a firing squad. Only his TV image slumps dead, the real man walking away – neatly encapsulating the theme of mass media distortion.

Finally, society's need for scapegoats is skewered in *Ga-Ga: Glory To The Heroes*. A prisoner is sent to an unknown planet. There, he's welcomed by the people of Earth-like society "Australia 458", who plan to impale him on a giant pole. Ouch. Scabrous and deadpan, it boasts some absurdist details, like a hotdog full of fingers served up to the impassive hero.

Extras The highlight is film writer Michael Brooke's motor-mouthed commentary on *O-Bi, O-Ba*: wryly humorous, it provides useful context on Polish politics. Daniel Bird performs the same function on *Ga-Ga*.

A new interview with *O-Bi, O-Ba*'s production designer (23 minutes) is instructive. A 2012 doc about Zygmunt Samosiuk, DoP on *WOTW* (30 minutes), includes quotes from Szulkin. A 2009 TV discussion show clip (22 minutes) is heavy on chin-stroking.

Each disc includes an animated short: Jan Lenica's "Labyrinth" (1963, 15 minutes); Miroslaw Kijowicz's "Cages" (1967, eight minutes); and Zofia Oraczewska's "Banquet" (1977, eight minutes). The first is the best. Gilliam-esque, it sees a winged Victorian chap fly to a photo-collage city. Plus: a brief video essay; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

"Richard Osman? Is that really you, or do I dream?"

> **He used sci-fi to sneak satire of officialdom past state censors**

i On *WOTW*, Szulkin consulted doctors to make an actress's eyeballs white. With no coloured contacts, they used egg whites.

JULES

★★★★☆

RELEASED 29 December

2023 | 12A | Download

Director **Marc Turtletaub**

Cast **Ben Kingsley, Harriet Sansom Harris, Jane Curtin, Jade Quon**

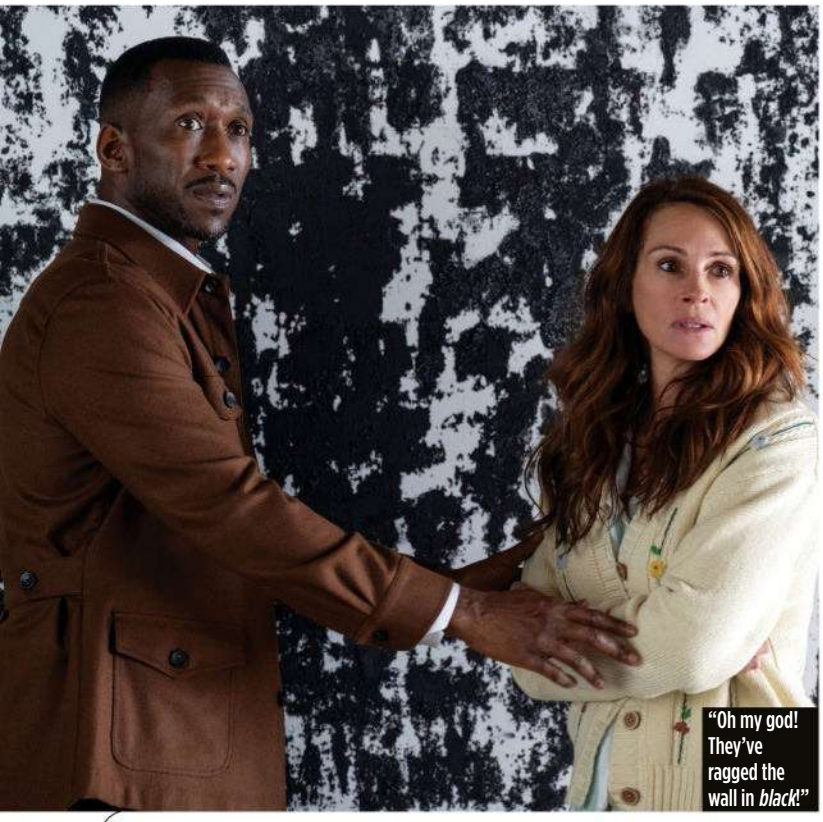
BLU-RAY DEBUT It's easy to approach *Jules* as a cynic: "Hmm, a low-budget sci-fi starring Oscar-winner Sir Ben Kingsley as an old geezer who finds an alien in his back garden? He must have fancied some quick cash to put in a new swimming pool." Maybe he did, but it doesn't matter; against the odds, this tiny pocket-money film is bloody lovely.

When pensioner Milton (Kingsley) discovers that a flying saucer has squashed his azaleas, nobody in his local community believes him, assuming he's just senile. As he helps the alien pilot Jules (Jade Quon) to fix the craft, local busybodies Sandy (Harriet Sansom Harris) and Joyce (Jane Curtin) get involved. And whaddya know? The three old codgers learn about themselves along the way.

There isn't a single thing here that's original – *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* and *Cocoon* did it all on a bigger budget – but the film's gentle tone, spiky dialogue and quirky humour count for a lot. Best of all are the performances; the moment Sandy first sees the alien on Milton's sofa is endlessly rewindable.

Jules is the polar opposite of hard SF – the softest, cuddliest alien invasion, perfect for older generations who can't be having with all that *Men In Black* nonsense. And we bet Kingsley is enjoying his new swimming pool, too.

Meg Wilde



LEAVE THE WORLD BEHIND

Blackout lives matter

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 | 15 | SVOD

Director **Sam Esmail**

Cast **Julia Roberts, Mahershala Ali, Ethan Hawke, Myha'la**

NETFLIX **This end-of days thriller** brings Rumaan Alam's 2020 novel to the screen with slow-burn power and paranoia to spare.

A brittle Julia Roberts is Amanda, who rents an upmarket holiday home for a family getaway. The glossy lifestyle-porn vibe soon gives way to something more disturbing: an eerily drifting oil tanker ploughs into a local beach, while two strangers arrive in what seems to be the world's most courteous home invasion. As a nationwide blackout cripples technology it's clear something's deeply wrong – but what?

There's an unmistakable touch of Shyamalan in the creeping existential dread, complete with flashes of inexplicable imagery. The film maintains an effective sense of restraint, and while the long runtime inevitably unscrews some of the tension it allows for strong character scenes.

As it builds to a pay-off made doubly chilling by real world events, you'll be persuaded the edge of the apocalypse is a more unsettling place to be than the end of the world itself. **Nick Setchfield**

i The role of GH Scott was first earmarked for Denzel Washington, who Amanda says he "looks a little like" in the book.

BLANK

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 8 January

2023 | 15 | Download

As primal fears go, writer's block is pretty niche. This indie chiller makes a compellingly nightmarish metaphor out of it, trapping a struggling novelist in a fully automated writer's retreat whose malfunctioning AI imposes a deadline in the most terrifying sense...

Anchored by a sympathetic performance by Rachel Shelley as the unravelling author, *Blank* dodges deeper questions of artificial authorship, but its tech-driven psychological horror should keep you in zeitgeisty shudders until the next *Black Mirror*. **Nick Setchfield**

MERRY LITTLE BATMAN

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 | 7+ | VOD

PRIME VIDEO **Batman's a sturdy** enough icon to take on all manner of weird shapes, including this kid-friendly cartoon movie. The focus is on Damian Wayne, Bruce's son, taking his first, faltering steps into crimefighting as the Joker returns to ruin Christmas.

The art style is amusingly gnarly – Batman's rogues' gallery is reimagined as a parade of grotesques. Some sly digs at the big-screen franchise help keep the seasonal tweeness at bay. **Nick Setchfield**

IT'S A WONDERFUL KNIFE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 | NR | SVOD

SHUDDER **After slasher riffs on** *Freaky Friday* (*Freaky*) and *Back To The Future* (*Totally Killer*), it's Frank Capra's turn, as a girl who offed a serial killer wishes she was never born. Cue a town still stalked by death.

Featuring a *Torchwood*-level LGBT quotient, it boasts a sweet romance and a gnarly candy-cane killing, but is rife with baffling plotting. From the mysterious lights which created this alternate universe to the shock twist (and beyond), little here makes sense. **Ian Berriman**

THE EXORCIST UNTOLD

★☆☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 | E | DVD/download

This doc on William Friedkin's 1973 classic boasts two useful interviewees: his biographer, and writer William Peter Blatty's widow. They deserved better than being dumped into this poorly structured mess, with its cliché-riddled narration and shameless padding (like the director's Oscar speech for *The French Connection*). Adding insult to injury, archive clips are stretched out of the correct aspect ratio. Untold? If only.

Extras None. **Ian Berriman**

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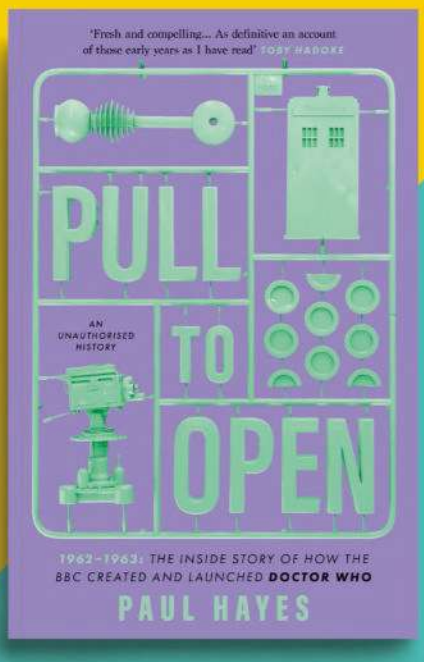
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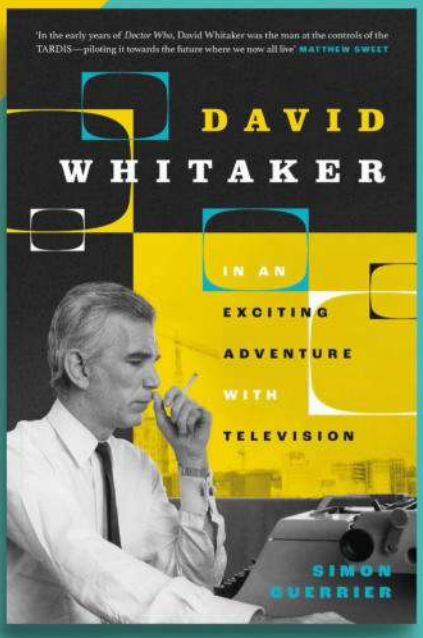
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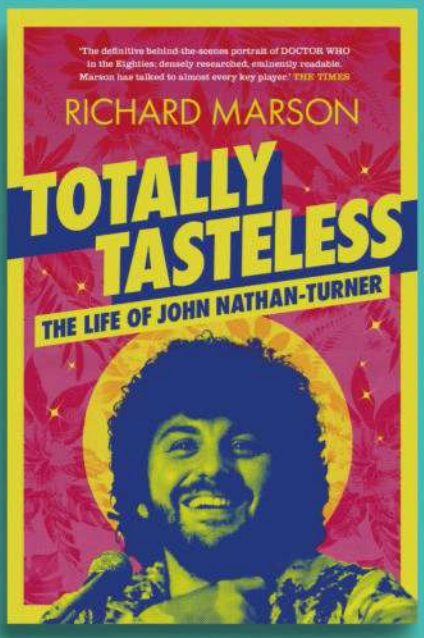
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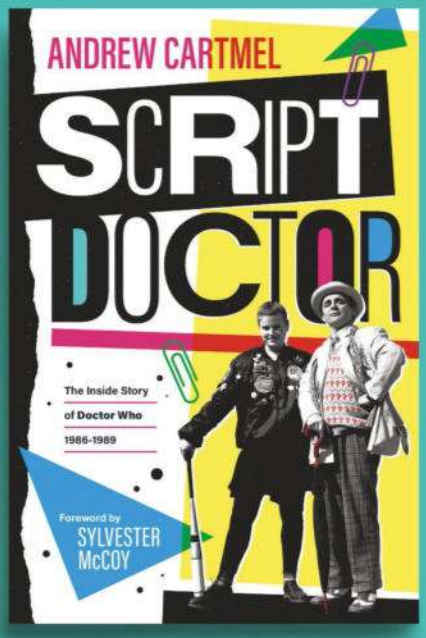

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BABYLON 5

The five-year mission

★★★★½ EXTRAS ★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1993-1998 | 12 | Blu-ray

Creator **J Michael Straczynski**

Cast **Bruce Boxleitner, Michael O'Hare, Claudia Christian, Mira Furlan**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Don't listen to** Tim Bisley in *Spaced*. *Babylon 5* is definitely *not* "a big pile of shit", and – three decades after its debut – J Michael Straczynski's famous five-year plan remains one of the greatest achievements in sci-fi TV history.

Even so, it's debatable how much this remastered *The Complete Series* Blu-ray release improves the story of the last of the Babylon stations. In high-definition, the limitations of sets and alien make-up designed for '90s telly are plain to see, while the groundbreaking CG spaceship effects (not upgraded to the same degree) are really showing their age these days.

But such criticisms are as unnecessary as quibbling over the abundance of quarries in classic *Doctor Who*, because in terms of scope, invention and, well, forward planning, *Babylon 5* is light years ahead of its contemporaries.

Although the mainstream media didn't grasp the show's importance during its original run, its complex, long-term plotting blazed a trail for the likes of *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad* and, of course, *Battlestar Galactica*.And while it's undeniably uneven – after the series' flirtation with premature cancellation, season five plays out like the afterthought it was – *Babylon 5* is a dream given memorable form.

> **"The mainstream media didn't grasp the show's importance"**

Extras Although original 95-minute pilot "The Gathering" sometimes feels like a work-in-progress, it's so integral to the show's overall story arc that we're not sure it counts as an extra. The box set's *Complete Series* moniker is also somewhat misleading, seeing as it's missing *In The Beginning*, *Thirdspace* and the numerous other *B5* TV movies. Featurettes and cast/crew commentaries from previous DVD releases are also conspicuous by their absence, and a trailer for animated 2023 comeback *The Road Home* doesn't really fill the hole. **Richard Edwards**

ℹ The Police's Stewart Copeland composed the soundtrack for the pilot. He also wrote the theme for *Star Wars* spin-off *Droids*.

HIGH TENSION

Bait and switchblade

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 22 JANUARY

2003 | 18 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)

Directors **Alexandre Aja**

Cast **Cécile de France, Maïwenn, Philippe Nahon**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Titled *Haute Tension*** in its homeland, this product of what was dubbed the New French Extremity was renamed *Switchblade Romance* in the UK. The accurate translation is, though rather bald, factual.

On the face of it, it's a very straightforward meat and potatoes home invasion horror. Friends Marie (Cécile de France) and Alex (Maïwenn) drive to the rural home of Alex's family. There chaos descends, as a middle-aged man in a boiler suit (Philippe Nahon) proceeds to slaughter the family.

Director Alexandre Aja and writer Grégory Levasseur were both in their early twenties, and a youthful enthusiasm for the genre comes across through homage. The whole thing whiffs of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. There's also a *Halloween*-esque closet scene, while a tightly wound sequence where the killer stalks a lavatory is cribbed from *Maniac*. It's a gleefully bloody affair, of the sort which at the time seemed like a pustulent pimple erupting on the face of French cinema.

The one complication is the last-act twist, which turns everything on its head. It's the sort of reveal it's impossible to guess, so there's no Shyamalan-style sense of pieces falling into place.

> **"Whiffs of The Texas Chain Saw Massacre"**

It just seems absurd – not to mention physically improbable.

Extras Academic Dr Lindsay Hallam delivers one of those commentaries that's a stream of observations, never letting an inability to pronounce French titles or surnames get in her way. Alexandra Heller-Nicholas's video essay (13 minutes) makes sound points about how the film plays with "final girl" expectations.

There are four new interviews, all decent, with Aja (35 minutes), Levasseur (19 minutes), the DOP (18 minutes) and the make-up effects artist (18 minutes). Aja has interesting things to say about that ending (more producer Luc Besson's idea). Archival features comprise a 38-minute Making Of and three interviews (34 minutes). The dual-format Limited Edition comes with a 70-page booklet and six art cards. **Ian Berriman**

ℹ During the toilet sequence, you can see the name "Margaret" scratched on a door – a nod to some identical graffiti in *Maniac*.

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MAUSOLEUM

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1983 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Michael Dugan**

Cast **Bobbie Bresee, Marjoe Gortner, Norman Burton, Maurice Sherbanee**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Despite coming** with all the '80s trash horror trimmings – a sexy blonde lead actress, gratuitous nudity, practical gore, and nonsensical supernatural business – this inept tale of demonic possession by way of, erm, a haunted mausoleum is a real slog to sit through. The new 4K restoration isn't particularly sympathetic to it, either.

Still, it's almost worth it when the poor possessed heroine's final form is revealed: this rubber-faced monstrosity, complete with man-eating "bitey boobs", has to be seen to be believed.

Extras Building on the extras from Vinegar Syndrome's 2018 US release (commentary by star Bobbie Bresee; a nine-minute interview with effects artist John Carl Buechler; trailer, gallery, TV spots), this Treasured Films release boasts tons of new content.

There's a knowledgeable commentary with horror buffs Kim Newman and Barry Forshaw; an in-depth audio interview with Bresee (53 minutes); a jaw-dropping video essay on *Mausoleum* star/former child preacher Marjoe Gortner (19 minutes); and a fascinating dive into the film's troubled production, by Stephen Thrower. The highlight is a 23-minute interview with straight-talking effects artist Christopher Biggs, who was brought in to handle reshoots. Plus: essay book; six art cards. **Sarah Dobbs**

Insert your own "dodgy kebab" joke here.

MURDER OBSESSION

Daft Freda

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1981 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Riccardo Freda**

Cast **Stefano Patrizi, Martine Brochard, Henri Garcin, Laura Gemser**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Both a comeback** and a last hurrah for Riccardo Freda (director of landmark Italian horror *I Vampiri*), this amusingly preposterous affair is a wobbly attempt to straddle both the Giallo and gothic genres.

It unfolds at a country house in an ersatz Surrey, often lit by candles due to its dodgy electrics. Thunder cracks; windows blow open; characters have strange dreams featuring bats on strings...

But there's also a killer slicing through the cast. The lead suspect: Michael (Stefano Patrizi), an actor who, as a child, killed his father. Much too obvious, right? The red herrings heap up – practically every character turns out to own black leather strangler gloves. As in *Scooby-Doo*, you can assume the least likely candidate is guilty.

Characterisation is, ahem, lacking in psychological realism. After a woman survives being strangled in the bath, no one considers calling the police! It's far from the only head-scratching moment: at one point we see an invisible force leaving footprints, but this is never explained.

Other ingredients include a chainsaw, a soupçon of *Rashomon*, and a nod to Michaelangelo's Pieta. A PhD student somewhere has probably argued that Freda was pushing the tropes of both genres to their limits to destabilise them. Occam's Razor suggests he just didn't much care.

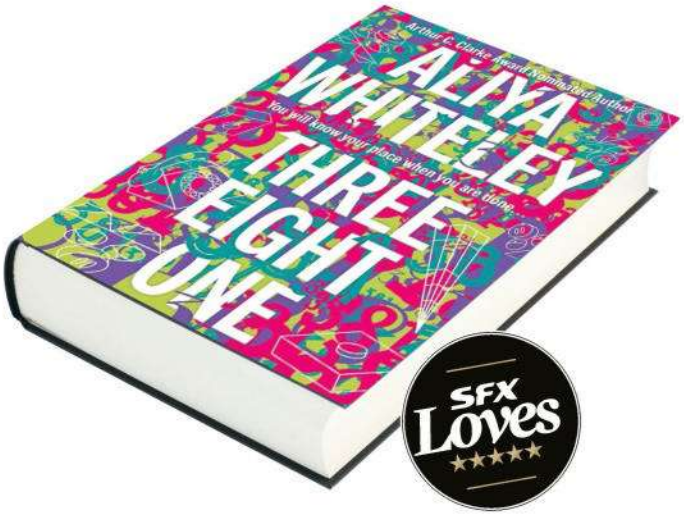
Extras Choose from Italian or English cuts; the dub is five minutes shorter, with noticeably crude edits. Expect vocabulary like "problematise" from Alexandra Heller-Nicholas's academic commentary. The three interviews are of uncertain vintage.

Composer Claudio Simonetti (22 minutes) discusses horror scores and his career – but not this film. Make-up effects guy Sergio Stivaletti (10 minutes) recalls a grumpy Freda. Filmmaker Gabriele Albanesi provides an appreciation (nine minutes). Plus: a 25-second trim. **Ian Berriman**

i Freda's daughter has said he only took on the film in order to earn money to finance a pet project about a WWI fighter ace.

ROUND UP

It's two months since Halloween, which means a slew of horror-themed physical media! David Gordon Green's **THE EXORCIST: BELIEVER** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, 8 January) sees not one but two girls becoming possessed, and brings back original cast member Ellen Burstyn. We said: "It takes some nerve to make an *Exorcist* film that isn't firmly centred on Catholicism... Might be the worst entry in the series." Bonuses: commentary by Green and three of his collaborators, plus six featurettes (running "over 30 minutes"). A Collector's Edition steelbook adds four art cards. Set between *Saw* and *Saw II*, **SAW X** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, out now) sees Jigsaw punishing the staff of a fraudulent Mexican clinic that claimed it could cure his cancer. We said: "It's neither the best nor the worst of the *Saw* films." Bonuses include a 95-minute documentary, three scene breakdowns, footage of traps being tested, and deleted scenes. The DoP and designer join director Kevin Greutert on the commentary. A prequel to the 2019 remake of the Stephen King movie, **PET SEMATARY: BLOODLINES** (Blu-ray/DVD, 8 January) is set chiefly in 1969, and takes pains to explain why there's a pet cemetery in the woods, and much more... We said: "The actual story is a distant second priority, behind all the explaining." Bonuses: five featurettes, totalling about 50 minutes. Finally, the latest TV box sets are **CREEPSHOW** Season Four (out now, Blu-ray/DVD) and **MAYFAIR WITCHES** Season One (8 January, Blu-ray/DVD).


Arthur C. Clarke Award Nominated Author
ALIYA WHITELEY
You will know your place when you are done.
THREE EIGHT ONE
SFX Loves

THREE EIGHT ONE

Storytelling by numbers

★★★★★

RELEASED 18 JANUARY
269 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Aliya Whiteley**
Publisher **Solaris**

Aliya Whiteley's work is tricky to categorise. This may be why – in a career of over 15 years, and despite being shortlisted for awards in fantasy, science fiction and horror – she has flown curiously under the radar.

Her best-known work to date is the unsettling post-apocalyptic body horror *The Beauty* (2014), a novella about gender, fungus and how and why communities tell stories about themselves. Originally published by much-missed small press Unsung Stories, it is due to be reissued in 2024 by Solaris, along with three other books from Whiteley's back catalogue. This is a good year, in other words, to discover her.

Her latest novel is characteristically strange: the sort of story whose shape and meaning keep shifting as you read. The main strand follows Fairly, a young woman who leaves behind her village and everyone she knows in order to travel the "Horned Road", a rite-of-passage quest whose goal even she is unsure of. Her journey takes her up mountains, into a lake, and includes interludes of working in a pub and on a farm. The language is clear and simple, and the plotting low-key – Fairly is often alone, and the day-to-day rhythms of her travels are unremarkable – but there are complex formal constraints lurking just beneath the surface.

At various points, for example, Fairly encounters devices that, when activated, change the way her story is told: from third person to first, or from past tense to present. Furthermore, the narrative is divided into sections, each of which is exactly 381 words long. This is, very self-consciously and deliberately, a constructed Story, and it is embedded within another story.

Reading the text alongside us is Rowena Savalas, a 24th-century would-be historian, whose increasingly baffled footnotes show us her own journey from sheltered youth to experienced age. Having found Fairly's tale while sifting the surviving traces of the early internet, Rowena spends years trying to interpret it, unsure even if she's dealing with fact or fiction. Her notes sometimes offer historical background, but she is as likely to spin off into arch free-association riffs on the meanings of words as she is to give concrete information.

Fairly's narrative is dreamlike, but with a tense, sinister edge; it's hard to shake the prickling fear that something could go wrong at any moment. People and locations encountered go unnamed, giving it an archetypal feel, like the template of a coming-of-age tale.

Deprived of dates or places, the reader is left unmoored, without the building blocks by which we relate to a protagonist or find purchase in a fictional world. The landscape is, superficially at least, completely ordinary; according to Rowena, it's 21st century England, before the vast geophysical and cultural upheaval that birthed her own society.

But this familiar setting is rendered subtly, unsettlingly alien by both Fairly's disassociated perspective and Rowena's often

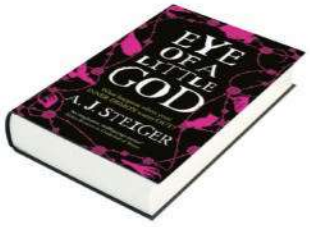
> **"The narrative is divided into sections, each 381 words long"**

equally estranging efforts to make sense of it. Mundane things like a rock by the road or an isolated wooden building seem to flicker into other shapes; people met on the road are unpredictably odd.

The few recurring features of the journey are malleable in their meaning and in their relationship to Fairly; what is comforting in one 381-word section can suddenly be threatening a few sections down the line. Who is the creepy "breathing man" following Fairly? And what on earth are the "cha": currency, companions, animals reared for food?

You shouldn't expect any definitive answers by the end; trying to pin down a singular meaning to this tale may be the way madness lies. But you *should* expect the world to feel that bit stranger. A wonderfully alienating experience. **Nic Clarke**

i Aliya Whiteley really *can't stand* mayonnaise. "Can't even be in the room when people are eating it," she says.



EYE OF A LITTLE GOD

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 2 JANUARY
288 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **AJ Steiger**
Publisher **Severn House**

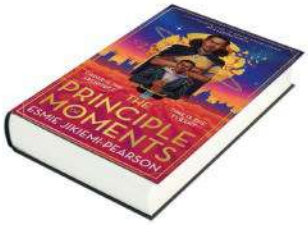
AJ Steiger's first adult fiction novel has some of the trappings of a horror story – curses, sinister phone calls, hints of possession – but it's more accurate to think of it as a portrait of obsession and loneliness.

Eddie Luther is haunted by the ghosts of his military past. Recently fired from the job that was his last connection to the world, he's hit rock bottom. But then he hears a voice in the woods calling for help. This leads him to a journal filled with cryptic writing that sets him on a journey to discover the truth about what really happened to a woman known only as Noelle.

Devil's Fork, Nebraska, is as frosty and isolated as the novel's protagonist. This is a small town of dead-end diners and sinister culverts, hemmed in by the forest, that's not a million miles away from Twin Peaks. It's a compelling setting, and the growing bond between Eddie and the equally troubled Lou becomes the heart of the novel – eventually.

This is a slow read, with our hero spending most of the book trudging from one terse conversation to another. There is magic here, both literal and metaphorical, but *Eye Of A Little God* is so unhurried and low-key that even taken as primarily a character drama it often feels like a bit of a perseverance test.

Will Salmon



THE PRINCIPLE OF MOMENTS

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
512 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson**
Publisher **Gollancz**

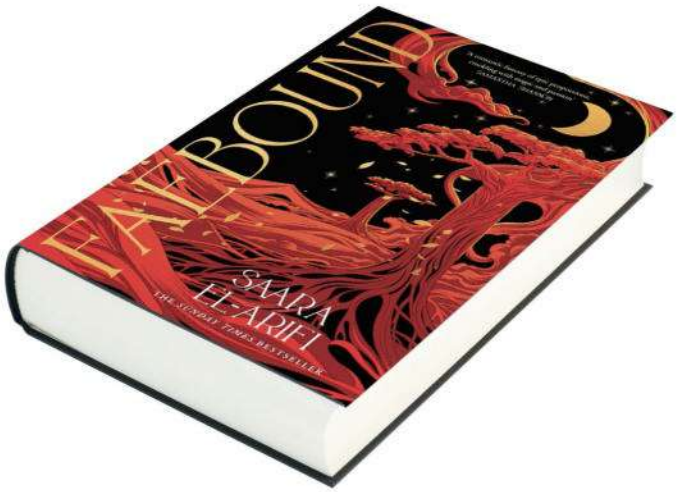
In 2020, Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson was the inaugural winner of the Future Worlds Prize, an award funded by writer Ben Aaronovitch and actor Adjoa Andoh to highlight unpublished science fiction and fantasy writers of colour.

The Principle Of Moments was written during Jikiemi-Pearson's schooldays, and it's as exuberant and full of Stuff as you'd expect from an exciting young imagination. There are prophecies and a space empire and time travel and reincarnation, but it's all organised around the experiences of a pair of appealing black lead characters with strong moral centres and a lot of courage.

Obi is a time-traveller who finds himself drawn to Regency-era London, and the prince he loves; in the far future, Asha is an indentured labourer, building weapons for an oppressive empire on a heavily policed desert planet. Naturally, our heroes team up to fight the power, in both past and present – or start at least, as this is the first in a trilogy.

The result is an engaging, if slightly uneven, science fantasy epic. In seeking to tell multiple stories, in multiple times and places, with so many different tropes, the book doesn't always give itself space to breathe. But it has enthusiasm to burn, and characters you'll root for.

Nic Clarke



FAEBOUND

The Remains Of The Fae

★★★★☆

RELEASED 18 JANUARY
372 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Saara El-Arifi**
Publisher **HarperVoyager**

This first instalment in a new series starts as a grimdark tale of neverending war and morphs into a throbbing romance.

Author Saara El-Arifi excels at world-building, conjuring a vibrant setting for her faerie fantasy. Hers is a land dominated by Elf tribes, whose ongoing territorial war has left them impoverished. Living in crystal caves beneath the battlefields are the Fae, beautiful and rich but trapped and bitter.

There's a gentle undercurrent of social commentary: look out for racial prejudice, cultural misunderstandings and generational conflict. "Our ignorance made victims of us" is how Elf Rayan articulates the moral of the story.

Tonally, it has a YA feel. Yeeran is the youngest colonel in the Elf army, but is exiled after a fatal blunder. The opening chapters give the impression this will be a military fantasy, perhaps something like *The Heroes* by Joe Abercrombie. But on being expelled from society, Yeeran, her sister Lettle and pal Rayan are almost immediately captured by the Fae, and the writing becomes more whimsical. While learning about Fae magic from their handsome jailors, they discover their unique destiny... because of course they do.

There's also plenty of passion; the book's latter half simmers with sexual tension as enemies become lovers. Brace for characters "cloaked only in desire" shagging under the trees. Greek tragedy springs to mind: it's all sex, prophecy and estranged family. With its forbidden relationships, it's reminiscent of last year's *Ledge* by Stacey McEwan.

The earth magic and general dystopian vibe also recall NK Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*, although the book's not as accomplished or powerful as that. Its enchanting love of nature knocks it into the orbit of *Gods Of The Wyrdwood* by RJ Barker, too.

That's not to say *Faebound* is weak or derivative. It has a tightly plotted arc, memorable characters and telegraphed but sneaky final twists. It's a little frothy, but this modern fairy tale feels destined to become a fae-vourite. **Dave Bradley**

i El-Arifi will make her historical debut in 2025 with a book about Cleopatra. A novel about the Queen Of Sheba will follow.

THE GLASS WOMAN

★★★☆☆

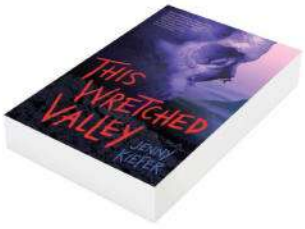
RELEASED 9 JANUARY
416 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Alice McIlroy**
Publisher **Datura Books**

Many of us have memories we'd rather not linger on. But would we choose to remove them if we could, to move on with our lives with no knowledge of what we once were – or why we even wanted them gone? And if we did, how would we ever know for sure that we could trust what's left?

This is how Iris's story begins: waking in a hospital with no memories, a husband she doesn't recognise at her side and a signed contract showing that she volunteered for the procedure. It was more than just traumatic memory removal, though, as an AI – Ariel – has now been planted in her brain, "helping" her to slowly recover the bulk of her memories and ensuring she doesn't do anything, go anywhere or say anything it doesn't feel she's ready for.

Distrustful of everyone and desperate to know what secrets are being kept from her, Iris attempts to uncover what really happened before her memories are lost forever.

It's an interesting premise that never really delivers. The procedure and its follow-up feel almost designed to induce paranoia and suspicion, and though you feel sympathy for Iris and horror at her situation, it's difficult to feel any connection to her. *The Glass Woman* is a fast read, but an ending rife with unsubtle and unsurprising twists ultimately fails to satisfy. **Rhian Drinkwater**



THIS WRETCHED VALLEY

★★★★☆

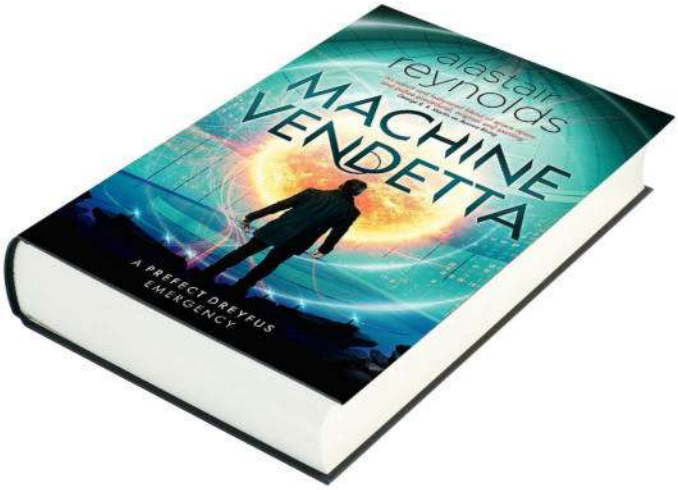
RELEASED 16 JANUARY
304 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Jenny Kiefer**
Publisher **Quirk Books**

Why do characters in horror stories always want to go running off into the middle of nowhere? For most of us, the idea of staying comfortably on the sofa is more appealing.

But at least Jenny Kiefer's intrepid band of doomed pals have a good reason: PhD student Clay wants to pioneer a new technique for discovering uncharted territories, while climbing influencer Dylan dreams of being the first to scale – and set routes across – a virgin rockface. Dragging along Clay's friend and Dylan's boyfriend to help out, the two of them head out into the wilds of Kentucky, and are then never seen again.

The book opens with the remains of several of the unfortunate kids being discovered, in various states of messiness, which creates an odd sort of suspense: we know who's going to die, but not how. Even by the end of the book, there are some lingering questions about their fate; this is one of those books that makes you nervous about the darkness outside your window.

Deliberately evoking the Dyatlov Pass incident, with more than a touch of *Pet Sematary* (and some *Free Solo* for good measure), it's a heady mix of nightmares conveyed in vivid, frequently too-colourful prose. One to read when you're safely at home with all the doors locked. **Sarah Dobbs**



MACHINE VENDETTA

Secrets and obfuscation

★★★★½

RELEASED 16 JANUARY
416 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Alastair Reynolds**
Publisher **Gollancz**

Such has been Alastair Reynolds's creative restlessness down the years that it still genuinely comes as a surprise when he returns to the Revelation Space universe with which he made his reputation.

A follow-up to 2018's *Elysium Fire*, *Machine Vendetta* marks the third time Reynolds has written a novel starring Prefect Tom Dreyfus, an upright but quietly maverick copper in the Panoply – a force whose beat is the Glitter Band, a collection of 10,000-plus disparate habitats circling the planet Yellowstone.

Without giving away too much (especially as the book can, at a pinch, be read as a standalone), it's work complicated by Dreyfus's own past. He's been less than honest about his interactions with two vastly powerful and malign machine intelligences, the Clockmaker and Aurora.

Their long-running and vicious feud at least ensures neither has too much energy to target the Glitter Band's citizens. But you can only keep secrets for so long, and as Dreyfus tries to work out why one of his colleagues, Ingvar Tench, went alone to a conflict-riven habitat where she had no business being, the consequences of his past decisions have a direct bearing on what follows.

Duty, truth and consequences are central to crime fiction, but rarely do these themes arrive with such a sense of jeopardy as Reynolds conjures up here. For all that this is a prequel to later Revelation Space novels, the tension ratchets up as Dreyfus,

> **"A sense of melancholy runs through the whole novel"**

driven in part by grief over the death of a second colleague, tries to work out what's really going on.

A sense of melancholy runs through the whole novel and might even overpower it, except that Reynolds is so brilliant at conjuring up set-piece action scenes – the last third in particular has all the widescreen grandeur of a galaxy-spanning space opera. A brilliantly realised melding of police procedural and hard SF. **Jonathan Wright**

i There's no screen version of a Revelation Space story yet, but novella *Diamond Dogs* was adapted for the stage in 2017.

VOYAGE OF THE DAMNED

★★★½☆

RELEASED 18 JANUARY
496 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Frances White**
Publisher **Michael Joseph**

High fantasy meets Agatha Christie in this whimsical murder mystery, set on a magical ship. The 12 leaders of the 12 realms of Concordia are on a 12-day ocean voyage, and one by one they're being murdered. They should be celebrating peaceful co-existence, but the deaths reveal deep-seated antagonisms.

So when the pretty-much universally reviled noble of the Union's poorest realm, Ganymede's "Pissfish" Piscero, takes it on himself to go full Poirot, he rubs up a lot of his co-passengers the wrong way.

There's so much world-building detail and so many hidden backstories in *Voyage Of The Damned* that it does all threaten to become *Murder On The Exposition Express* at times, and towards the end it becomes a bit of a relentless slog of revelations, as the tortuously contrived set of circumstances needed to get the overall plot to work are revealed.

Author Frances White "gets away with it" though, partly because the whodunnit structure relies on such explanatory excess, but mainly because she writes with such a bubbly sense of fun. Wonderfully oddball characters, an energetic prose style and snappy dialogue keep things bubbling along, and there's a very engaging love story underpinning it all. **Dave Golder**

AVA ANNA ADA

★★★½☆

RELEASED 18 JANUARY

272 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Writer **Ali Millar**

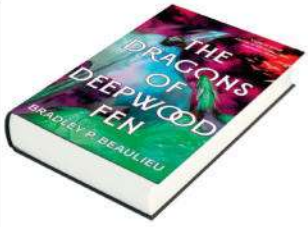
Publisher **White Rabbit Books**

Following an acclaimed memoir dealing with growing up amid Jehovah's Witnesses, Ali Millar's debut novel also deals with family matters. Specifically, it focuses on middle-class influencer Anna, whose grief draws her towards a young woman, Ava, who reminds her of her lost child. The duo's destructive relationship plays out over just a few days, but at different moments seems to consume both of them.

Against a near-future backdrop of anxiety over accelerating climate change, a sense of crisis and things not being quite as they seem pervades a book that, in key respects, calls to mind Iain M Banks's *The Wasp Factory*. Throughout the novel, there's a visceral poetry to be found if you've got the stomach for it, such as when Ava tells us about witnessing a crow drowning and then eating a seagull.

Whether Millar's evocation of a society breaking down is quite as convincing is another matter. There's a nagging sense of a setting that's too climate-change generic, and that maybe the novel's structure – its energy focused inwards on Anna and her family and Ava – may be partly responsible for this. In these terms, it could be a better science fiction book. Nonetheless, it's an eerie meditation on madness, the hunger for love and connection, and survival.

Jonathan Wright



THE DRAGONS OF DEEPWOOD FEN

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 4 JANUARY

704 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Bradley P Beaulieu**

Publisher **Ad Astra**

Epic fantasy meets police procedural in *The Dragons Of Deepwood Fen*, the first in a new series from *The Shattered Sands* author Bradley P Beaulieu. There's an extensive roster of characters, but the main protagonists are Lorelei Aurelius, an Inquisitor (essentially a police officer) in the city of Ancris, and Rylan Holbrooke, a dragon singer and thief.

There is an enormous amount of worldbuilding and lore to establish in the first half, which proves to be a drag on the pace. Ancris is one of the main cities in the Empire, which has forcibly subjugated the arboreal wilds of the Holt, where rebels called the Red Knives agitate to overthrow their oppressors. There's a complex web of political and religious intrigues to navigate, with power struggles, counterplots and slumbering gods all competing for space.

The novel's primary shortcoming is the failure to make the labyrinthine plot feel intimately tied to Lorelei and Rylan. She's essentially a detective trying to crack a case, but Beaulieu struggles to make the investigation resonate emotionally with the heroes or the reader. Similarly, the story's grand moment of cataclysm feels underwhelming. There are many intriguing ideas here, but overall too much exposition and not enough heart. **David West**

SO LET THEM BURN

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 16 JANUARY

400 pages | Paperback/ebook

Author **Kamilah Cole**

Publisher **Atom**

If there's one fantasy trope threatening to reach its sell-by date, it's the idea of a dragon having to "bond" psychically with a special human rider. This hoary old concept is just one of many littered throughout this YA fantasy, a novel of, sadly, a million clichés.

We enter its world five years after a war which was ended by a child, Faron Vincent, who channelled god-like powers to defeat her dragon-riding enemies. Now 17, Faron is a national hero. Meanwhile her sister, Elara, unexpectedly bonds with a dragon belonging to the bad guys and must leave to train with them.

Devastated, Faron wants to break that dragon/human bond to save her sister's life, but under the shadow of a new war, accepting help from a mysterious spectral figure is probably a bad idea...

There's no denying that debut author Kamilah Cole can spin a good yarn, but there are huge flaws here: the biggest being that we pick up *after* a world-defining battle; the feeling that you're reading a sequel without having read the original never really goes away. Other issues include the fact that Elara's dragon barely has a personality, and a queen who seems like a fascinating main character who's been inexplicably edited down to a bit-player.

In the end, however, the world-building is simply too familiar: it's less a book, more a feeling of déjà vu. **Jayne Nelson**

REISSUES

Pick of the paperbacks: Grady Hendrix's latest horror novel, **HOW TO SELL A HAUNTED HOUSE** (★★★★★, 16 January, Titan). When their parents

are killed in a car accident, two siblings have to deal with disposing of their childhood home. Not helping matters: it's full of the creepy old homemade puppets their preacher mother used to tell kids Bible stories. Expect unpleasantness involving a circular saw. We said: "Really a story about families and the lies they tell one another... If you don't have a pre-existing phobia of dolls, you'll soon develop one." Hannah Kaner's debut **GODKILLER** (★★★★☆, 19 January, HarperVoyager) is set in

a world where gods live alongside humans – though these chaotic creatures have been banished from the land. The titular swordswoman, Kissen, makes a living killing them. But she can't kill Skedi, a god of white lies, as he's bound himself to a young noble. Cue a quest to a ruined city, pursued by demons. We said: "Kaner gives each of her lead characters a vivid inner life and compelling history." Finally, Sebastien de Castell's **THE MALEVOLENT SEVEN** (★★★★☆, 18 January, Jo Fletcher Books) sees a mercenary spellcaster recruited for a mission to kill seven powerful mages.

We said: "Knowing winks at the reader and earthy language make for a tone somewhere between Terry Pratchett and *Deadpool*... Has chaotic energy, clever ideas, and characters that stay with you after the final page."

THE TOMORROW PEOPLE: CHANGES

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
280 pages | Paperback
Author **Andy Davidson**
Publisher **Chinbeard Books/Oak Tree Books**

***The Tomorrow People* gets** a *Spider-Man: No Way Home*-style reboot in this ambitious novel, which uses parallel worlds to draw together characters from the '70s, '90s and 2013 TV series into one unified continuum.

Not that this is immediately obvious. At the beginning of the book telekinetic, telepathic, teleporting teens are conspicuous by their absence. We're introduced to an alternate-history 2023 Earth, where humans happily cohabit with an alien race called the Thargons – even interbreeding with them. But one person knows this world isn't as it should be: a global teen pop sensation called Gabriel. And he has a plan to get things back on track.

Based on a treatment by series creator Roger Price, *Changes* will be followed by a bi-monthly range of novellas. Sadly, it's a rocky, choppy affair. In places it has an affable wit and charm, but it struggles with juggling too many elements in a short page count, ending up feeling rushed and underdeveloped, with far too many returning characters who are just names given some action to perform.

A prose style with an annoying wandering viewpoint and a Big Bad who's a dodgy old trope most TV shows wouldn't touch these days don't help matters. **Dave Golder**

BLAKE'S 7 SERIES A PRODUCTION DIARY

Seven/Nation Tsunami

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
271 pages | Hardback
Author **Jonathan Helm**
Publisher **Cult Edge**

A labour of love, this print-on-demand making-of for the opening run of Terry Nation's '70s sci-fi saga about a bunch of freedom fighters takes a day-by-day approach. It kicks off on 9 September 1975, when the Daleks' creator improvised a pitch in a meeting with the BBC's Head of Serials, and closes by reproducing an audience research report from 18 June 1978.

You're swept along by a flood of data – with pleasing trivia nuggets bobbing up every so often. Did you know that they toyed with making our hero Blake a schoolteacher? That eyepatched baddie Travis's outfit was sourced from an establishment revelling in the name Hardcore Leather? Or that a "power unit" in one set was actually a fibreglass cesspit?

It's a visual feast, reproducing treasures such as BBC memos, fragments of snipped script and rehearsal shots featuring actors in their everyday clobber. Other treats include storyboards for the title sequence, a synopsis for an abandoned script, and the *Blue Peter* information sheet for making your own teleport bracelet! Best of all, though, are an array of concept designs for spaceships, weapons and assorted other props.

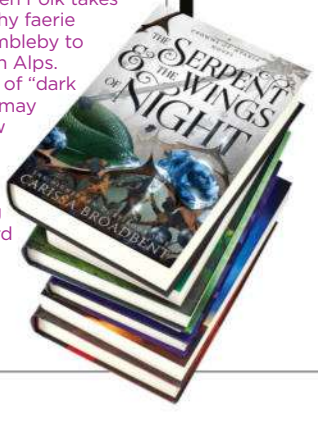
The daily format does have its disadvantages, bouncing you back and forth when three episodes are being worked on in the same week. The urge to document precisely what was shot on every recording day results in a surfeit of screengrabs. And a 14-page section detailing every last Liberator model sequence seems overly anal. All the same, this is both an impressively comprehensive piece of research and a thing of beauty.

The one stumbling block is the price: a wince-inducing £51.22. Bear in mind, however, that this is a not-for-profit book, with that figure including donations to both UNICEF and the Alzheimer's Society. Plus you can shave 15% off with the discount code WELCOME15. **Ian Berriman**

i The hand-held controls on the Liberator's flight deck were made using parts from Anglepoise lamps.

ALSO OUT

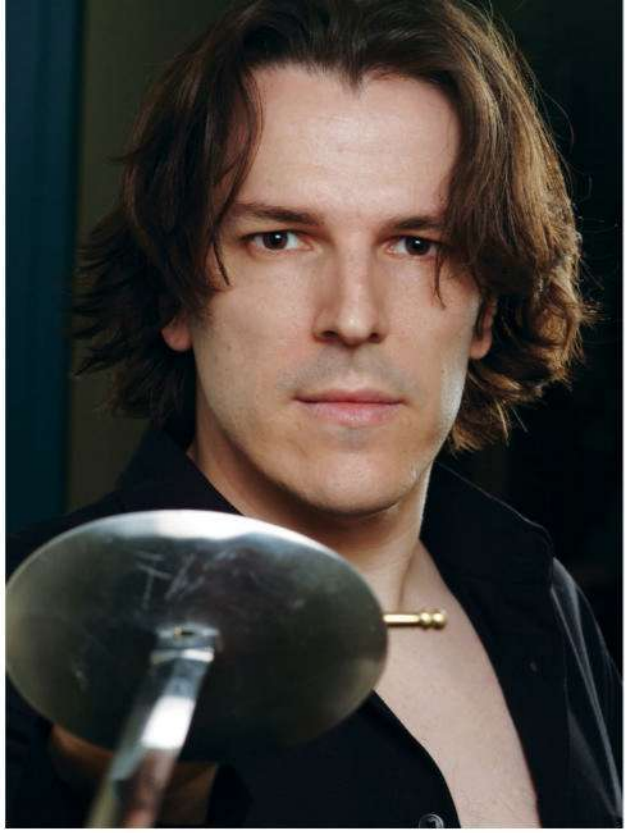
There's plenty more books we couldn't quite fit in. After titles tackling *Shaun Of The Dead* and David Lynch's *Dune*, 1984 Publishing's latest behind-the-scenes book anatomises a cult slasher: **SLEEPAWAY CAMP: MAKING THE MOVIE AND REIGNITING THE CAMPFIRE** (out now). "*The Hunger Games* with vampires" is how Carissa Broadbent's gothic romance **THE SERPENT & THE WINGS OF NIGHT** (out now, Tor) is being promoted. It sees the adopted human daughter of a vampire king entering a tournament which pits her against vicious warriors from three vampire houses. Sci-fi and horror constitute only a fraction of the director's filmography, but given that it runs to over 650 pages, new biography **KUBRICK: AN ODYSSEY** (18 January, Faber & Faber) should contain a fair amount on *2001, A Clockwork Orange* and *The Shining*. If you read our last issue you'll know all about bookazine **ADVENTURES IN TYPE AND SPACE** (9 January), an oral history of *Doctor Who*'s classic-era title sequences. But as it's raising money for UNICEF, we thought we'd remind you! Order it at bit.ly/typeandspace. Our reviewer was charmed by Heather Fawcett's book *Emily Wilde's Encyclopaedia Of Faeries*. Now there's a follow-up: in **EMILY WILDE'S MAP OF THE OTHERLANDS** (18 January, Orbit), a project to chart the realms of the Hidden Folk takes her and dishy faerie scholar Bambleby to the Austrian Alps. Finally fans of "dark academia" may like to know that Olivie Blake's Atlas series is wrapping up with third book **THE ATLAS COMPLEX** (9 January, Tor).



THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Sebastien de Castell

The man behind the Greatcoats series loves living on the edge...



JAMIE ROTHFUSS

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?

I devise key moments in my novels by going for a run and listening to a song over and over that resonates with the underlying drama of that part of the story. About 10 kilometres later, I'll usually have the choreography and rhythm of the scene worked out, which then makes its way onto the page once I'm back at my desk.

How do you deal with the problem of writers' block?

I try to be curious and experimental rather than judgemental, asking myself, "How about I just spend five minutes trying to write one sentence and see how that feels?" If my anxiety intensifies, I'll let myself procrastinate, but come back an hour later and try again. I find that if I repeat that enough times, my brain calms down and soon I'm writing again. My mantra is: *Beat the writers' block, don't beat up on the writer*.

Which of your books are you the most proud of?

Tyrant's Throne, the climactic ending of the Greatcoats Quartet, which somehow manages to tie up all the themes about idealism and friendship that first drove me to write *Traitor's Blade*, my debut novel, in ways that still surprise and delight me to this day.

Which of your books has been the most difficult to write?

[Forthcoming book] *Our Lady Of Blades* has been steadily driving over a cliff for the past several years because its unusual structure turns every pair of chapters into a kind of narrative stage magician's trick. Each time one of those twists and turns work, however, it really does feel like magic.

Do you have any writing "bad habits" that you have to keep in check?

My redoubtable editor, Jo Fletcher, used to say of the Greatcoats novels: "You can make Falcio [leader of the Greatcoats] as maudlin and introspective as you want in the first half of the book, but I'm cutting those bits from the last act." Tens of thousands of readers thank you, Jo.

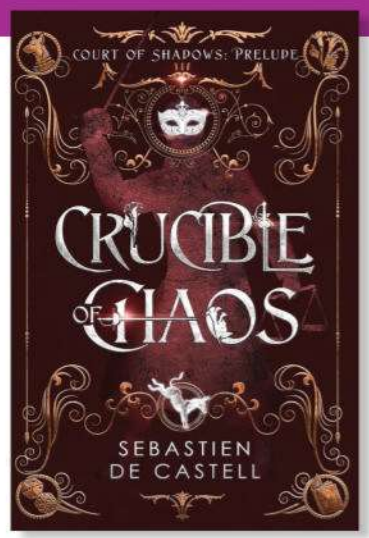
What would be your desert island book?

Don Quixote. I'm reliably informed it's one of the greatest works of fiction ever written, and the only way I'm likely to get through its 1,072 pages is if I'm trapped on a desert island.

Is there any particular author whose writing ability makes you envious?

Miles Cameron [the pen name of Christian Cameron] can sit down for hours at a time, every single day, and create new words not for the sake of pleasing editors or outwitting the market, but simply to follow his own curiosity and delight his own sense of narrative mischief. That's a real writer, right there.

If Sebastien is shipwrecked this'll look very ironic.



What is the biggest misconception people have about being a professional author?

The legendary screenwriter, William Goldman, once said of the film business, "Nobody knows anything". That perfectly encapsulates my experience of the publishing industry. Nothing is predictable, nobody gets it right with any regularity, and as an author I'm forever at the precipice of either fabulous success or total disaster. I love it.

Crucible Of Chaos – a prelude to new series Court Of Shadows – is available now from Jo Fletcher Books. The Malevolent Seven is out in paperback on 18 January.

WONDER WOMAN

The Powered-Lass View

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Tom King**
Artist **Daniel Sampere**

ISSUES 1-3 **Superhero comics have** been dabbling with the political thriller subgenre for a long time, but it's safe to say that the 1970s conspiracy vibe of movies such as *Three Days Of The Condor* and *The Parallax View* probably isn't what you'd expect to find in a *Wonder Woman* comic.

This is, however, very close to what we get in DC's latest relaunch, which sees a bold new direction for the Amazonian hero, as her relationship with her adopted country gets pushed to the brink. These first three issues set up a bunch of intriguing threads, as a seemingly random attack by an Amazon warrior gets portrayed in the media as a terrorist incident, and suddenly the USA turns against the Amazons, and Wonder Woman in particular.

While Diana is forced to battle the US Army (leading to plenty of big-scale action sequences), the real source of her problems is the secret king of America, known only as the Sovereign... What we have here is a superhero series that isn't afraid to get provocative with its themes, but which is also held back by some odd narrative choices. Writer Tom King is an offbeat choice for *Wonder Woman*, and his more psychological approach does make the story feel fresh and dangerous.

Partly this is thanks to him largely steering clear of the mythic fantasy that has been a staple of *Wonder Woman* comics in recent years. Instead, there's a much darker, grittier edge to the story, with the central concept of the Sovereign (and his "Lasso of Lies") hinting at some fascinating directions for the series to go in. This is helped by the impressive art from Daniel Sampere, which carefully balances tense character scenes and kinetic action.

It's frustrating, then, that the approach to Diana herself feels a little too stoic and distant, only occasionally showcasing the warmth and humanity that's core to her character. Also, while the series is exploring some daring themes, there are points where the storytelling is a bit *too* on-the-nose, and the ultra-serious tone sits oddly with broad characters such as chauvinistic arsehole Sergeant Steel.

> **"A psychological approach makes the story feel fresh"**

This doesn't take away from the promising elements that these first three issues get right, it just means that this new take on Wonder Woman isn't an immediate slam-dunk.

Hopefully King and Sampere can eventually find their feet, because despite its flaws, this is still far riskier and more interesting than most current mainstream superhero titles.

Saxon Bullock

i Wonder Woman's first live-action appearance was in a little-known 1974 TV movie, played by Cathy Lee Crosby.

WITH RESPECT, SAH! EIGHTY-NINE'S ONE OF MY LADS. IT OUGHT TO BE ME GOES OUT THERE, SAH. HONOUR OF THE REGIMENT, ANY ALL THAT.
SHUT YOUR MOUTH, ZERO.

TERRAHAWKS COMIC ANTHOLOGY

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Anderson Entertainment**
Writer **Angus P Allan**
Artists **Jim Baikie, Steve Kyte**

COLLECTION ***Terrahawks'* stint** in kids' mag *Look-in* was short-lived but nevertheless entertaining, as this collection – released to coincide with the 40th anniversary of Gerry Anderson's final puppet show – shows.

Angus P Allan's brisk scripts perfectly capture the series' oddball tone, which resembles a bizarre mix of *UFO*, *Star Wars* and *The Dark Crystal*. However the four main stories – broken down into two-page instalments of four to six episodes – are all resolved a little too neatly, with the first, which tapped into the growing videogame craze, and the second, which sees a robotic cuckoo infiltrating Hawknest, proving the most intriguing.

Given his ability to re-clone himself, lead character Tiger Ninestein never really seems in much peril, while most of the humour is provided by spherical, motormouth robot Sergeant Major Zero.

Jim Baikie's art in the first three tales is sinewy and kinetic, while his replacement on the fourth, Steve Kyte, adds a manga-inspired edge to his linework. Also containing several inferior strips and text stories from various annuals, this is a slight but worthwhile addition to Anderson Entertainment's *Comic Anthology* range.

Stephen Jewell

MS MARVEL: THE NEW MUTANT

★★★☆☆

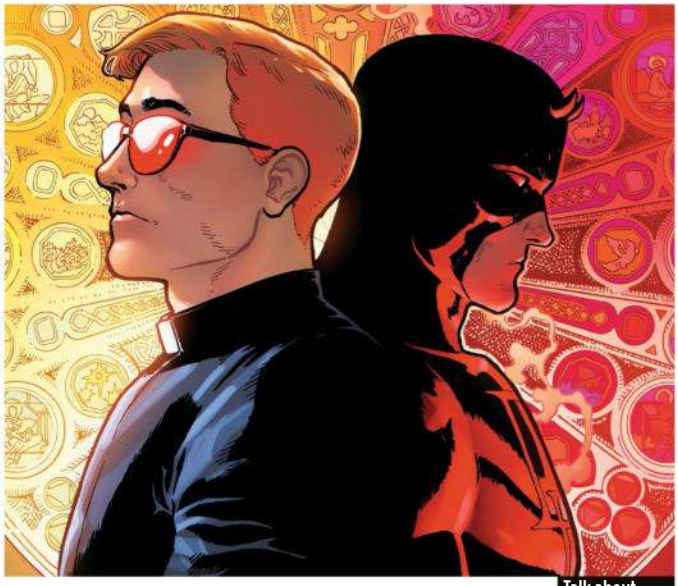
RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writers **Iman Vellani, Sabir Pirzada**
Artists **Carlos Gómez, Adam Gorham**

ISSUES 1-4 **After her recent** death, Kamala Khan has been resurrected with undue haste even by Marvel's usual standards. Recasting her as a mutant brings the comic book character in line with her MCU equivalent, and hiring *Ms Marvel* actor Iman Vellani to co-write this four-issue miniseries (with Sabir Pirzada) further enhances that synergy.

Taking her out of her New Jersey element, it sees Kamala enrolling at New York's Empire State University, and while we miss her family and friends, best pal Bruno at least comes along for the ride. Tying in with the ongoing *Fall Of X* line, the plot sees her infiltrating a tech programme run by anti-mutant organisation Orchis.

Emphasising Kamala's status as "the only Pakistani-American-Inhu-Mutant", Vellani and Pirzada add a new dimension to the archetypal *X-Men* themes of racial prejudice. They also have plenty of fun, as the hybrid heroes of Kamala's fan-fiction, such as the Dr Strange/Silver Surfer combo Dr Surfer, come to life in her dreams.

It all culminates in a furious fight with a Stark Sentinel on campus, with Ms Marvel ending up winning her fellow students' hearts. While many loose ends are left unresolved, they can hopefully be addressed in the upcoming *Ms Marvel: Mutant Menace*. **Stephen Jewell**



Talk about rose-tinted spectacles, eh?

DAREDEVIL

Better red than dead

★★½☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writer **Saladin Ahmed**
Artist **Aaron Kuder, Farid Karami**

ISSUES 1-3 **Considering its** reputation as one of Marvel's most street-level and grounded superhero sagas, *Daredevil* has never been afraid to get surprisingly weird across its six-decade history. Marvel's latest relaunch has to deal directly with that weirdness, picking up from the end of writer Chip Zdarsky's recently concluded run with Matt Murdock having died, gone to Hell, and then mysteriously come back to life with no memory of his time fighting crime in a scarlet devil costume.

On top of all this, Murdock is now a Catholic priest. But *Daredevil* isn't about to turn into a character-driven religious drama, so these first three issues give us plenty of complications. Matt's memories are already starting to return (leading to the predictable "blind priest unexpectedly beats the hell out of bad guys" sequence), there are various threats to the Catholic orphanage he currently oversees, and he's being menaced by a supernatural force that seems linked to his bizarre resurrection.

> **"Making his religious beliefs a central conflict is a strong idea"**

Making Matt Murdock's religious beliefs a central conflict is a strong idea, and it's always possible that writer Saladin Ahmed's long-term plan for the story is going to pay off – but right now, these three issues rarely manage to rise above functional.

There are melodramatic twists and ambiguous menace, but little in the way of a compelling narrative hook (and barely any attempt to be new-reader friendly). The energetic and sometimes cartoony approach from artists Aaron Kuder and Farid Karami gives us engaging visuals, but otherwise this new chapter for *Daredevil* is off to a lacklustre start. **Saxon Bullock**

i Though Saladin Ahmed is Muslim, his mother's side is Irish Catholic, making him "familiar with some of the touchstones".

THE FLASH

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Si Spurrier**
Artist **Mike Deodato Jr**

ISSUES 1-3 **While the Scarlet** Speedster's recent big-screen outing concentrated on Barry Allen, the Silver Age Flash has long taken a backseat in DC's comic book universe. This new monthly, like its predecessor, keeps the focus on Wally West, who has always been a more engaging protagonist than his uncle.

Like our hero, you might ask yourself "What the absolute screaming hell is going on?", as writer Si Spurrier discombobulates the reader as much as Wally himself. With his powers out of control, Wally is sent reeling through the Speed Force, which is depicted as an elemental field similar to *Swamp Thing*'s the Green.

For a title about the Fastest Man Alive, it often makes for a slow, measured read; Spurrier indulges in some amusing sci-fi speak, occasionally over-elaborating with esoteric references – such as to the ancient Greek origins of the word "stasis".

Considering the density of the script, Mike Deodato Jr does an admirable job with his imaginative, intricately designed layouts, with the action often progressing in one smooth movement through a quick succession of panels.

Things come to a head in issue three as old enemy the Folded Man is revealed as the main villain. This unsettling, more horrific take runs counter to *The Flash*'s usual bright optimism, and is all the more intriguing for it. **Stephen Jewell**

AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

Welcome To The Jungle

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Reviewed on **PC**

Also available on **PS5, Xbox Series X**

Publisher **Ubisoft**

VIDEOGAME **There is a very simple** hook to *Avatar: Frontiers Of Pandora* which won't win any awards for originality, but does make for an enjoyable open world adventure that works wonders with the source material.

If you've ever played a *Far Cry* game, well, this is basically that in space – exploring a map that opens up as you push through the story, revealing more territories, missions, side quests, abilities and more.

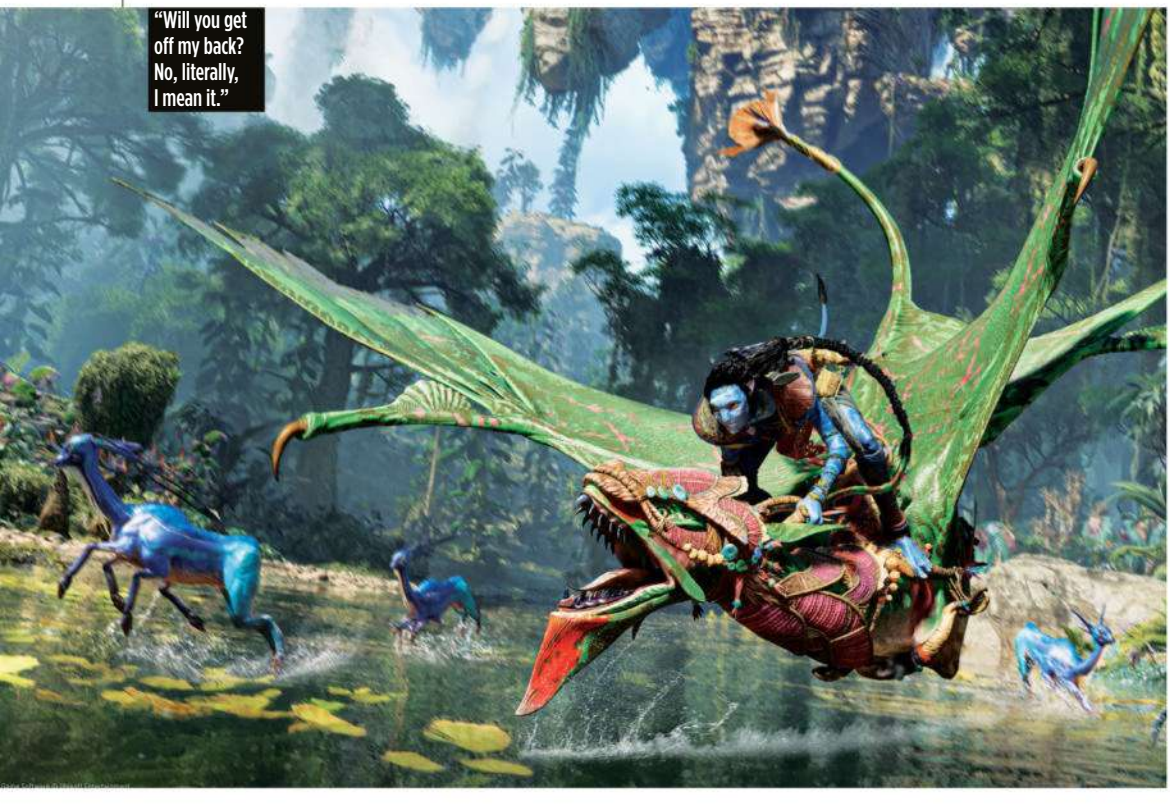
It's a simple and well-used set-up and, while *Frontiers Of Pandora* is definitely nothing original mechanically, it's an enjoyable and solidly made version of an otherwise very familiar thing. There are enemy bases to take down, random events to come across as you explore, and a range of factions to meet and win over as you fight against the villainy of the human invaders.

It breathes life into Pandora and the Na'vi tribes in a way that might actually be better than the films. That's because you get time to explore and appreciate this jungle moon in a way that lingers far more than the movies do in-between all the action.

The alien setting is a beautiful thing; just wandering through it, as strange creatures leap through the even stranger foliage, is an absolute treat. And the gameplay amplifies the eco-focused themes of the Na'vi and their relationship with their home. You have to harvest and hunt, tracking animals or picking fruits to craft gear and weapons or cook stat-buffing food.

Your progress is literally tied to the land and rewarded by your relationship with it. This works well against competent, if not outstanding, gameplay. At times it feels like playable concept art, creating a location that feels unfamiliar and encouraging the exploration it was built for. Even if you're not a fan of James Cameron's films, it's a great combination and makes for an enjoyable experience. **Leon Hurley**

i The first James Cameron movie to inspire a game was *Aliens*, with two different titles (one US, one UK) released in 1986.



"Will you get off my back? No, literally, I mean it."

THE WICKER MAN

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

48 minutes

Director **Anthony DP Mann**

Broadcaster **Radio 4 Extra**

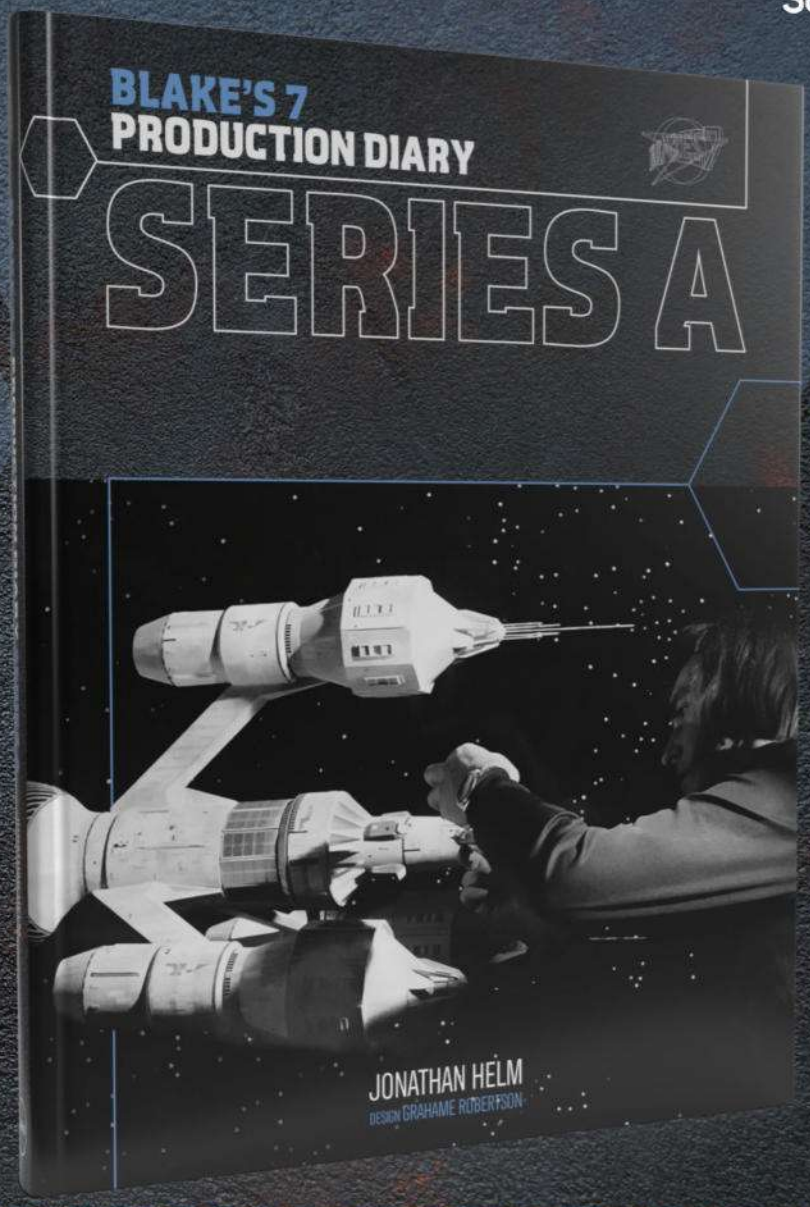
AUDIO DRAMA **An adaptation of** the folk horror classic starring Brian Blessed? Your first thought is that Howie – the copper who investigates a girl's disappearance on a pagan island – might escape by belting out The Lord's Prayer so loud the sacrificial edifice collapses. But Britain's best bellower instead plays Lord Summerisle, employing a tone that's the aural equivalent of Christmas pudding smothered in custard.

Radio 4 Extra's recent *World Of The Wicker Man* night gave this Canadian production its radio debut, though it was first released on vinyl in 2020. It hits all the main story beats, but is heavily compressed, shorn of musical sequences: there's no pub belting out "The Landlord's Daughter" here. Willow's naked dance is, naturally, missing too. Other visual elements are communicated via Dictaphone logs, recorded even as the flames are licking...

Little new is added, barring a wrap-up that (echoing dialogue cut from the film's script) sees Summerisle telling Howie's superior that the Sergeant left the island in his seaplane.

It's inoffensive enough, though a bit too on-the-nose at times: villagers repeatedly refer to Howie as "a fool" before he adopts the ritual costume. And the jaunty folk score is rather obtrusive, forever underlining revelations with dramatic kettle drum thumps. Still intrigued? Hurry! It drops off BBC Sounds at New Year. **Ian Berriman**

IN SUPPORT OF unicef **AND** Alzheimer's Society



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Blastermind
The SFX quiz

RELIGION

Oh Lord, guide Thou our devout *SFX* readers on the path of exactitude as they ponder our posers. Amen

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 1
Which 1974 *Doctor Who* story is partially set at a Buddhist meditation centre?

QUESTION 2
Name Scientology founder L Ron Hubbard's 1982 sci-fi novel, later made into a blockbuster movie starring John Travolta.

QUESTION 3
Who wrote the 1969 novella *Behold The Man*, in which a time traveller visits the Holy Land in 28AD, hoping to meet Jesus?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Name this priest, and the actor who played him.

QUESTION 5
In *Blake's 7*, who played Vargas, the leader of the religious sect on the planet Cygnus Alpha?

QUESTION 6
Complete the title of this Arthur C Clarke short story: "The ____ _____ Names Of God".

QUESTION 7
In *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, by what religious title do the Bajorans refer to the wormhole?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
In which religious-themed film would you find this spaceship?

QUESTION 9
In *The Handmaid's Tale*, what is the name of the fundamentalist political group who formed the Republic of Gilead?

QUESTION 10
By what other title is the Catholic-themed slasher film *Alice, Sweet Alice* known? (We'll accept more than one...)

QUESTION 11
Which 2012 comic centres on a clone of Christ, created using DNA taken from the Shroud of Turin?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
What artefact do these strange characters worship?

QUESTION 13
In the *Doctor Who* story "The Face Of Evil", what does Xoanon, the god worshipped by the Tesh, turn out to be?

QUESTION 14
In which film would you find computerised confession booths for speaking to a state-sanctioned deity called OMM 0000?

QUESTION 15
What's the name of the Netflix TV series based on Mark Millar's comic *American Jesus*?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
In which *Doctor Who* episode does the Time Lord encounter this holy personage?

QUESTION 17
Which Hammer horror film centres on a mysterious religious order known as the Children of the Lord?

QUESTION 18
In *Futurama*, what's particularly notable about the head of the First Amalgamated Church?

QUESTION 19
Name the 1959 sci-fi novel by Walter M Miller Jr, centred on an order of monks.

QUESTION 20
What's the name of the Klingon afterlife where all true warriors go after death?

Answers

1 "Planet Of The Spiders"
2 *Battlefield Earth* 3 Michael Moorcock 4 Father Merrin, Max von Sydow 5 Brian Blessed 6 Nine Billion Names Of God 7 The Celestial Temple 8 *Monty Python's Life Of Brian* 9 The Sons of Jacob 10 *Communion/Holy Terror* 11 *Punk Rock Jesus* 12 A nuclear bomb (in *Beneath The Planet Of The Apes*) 13 A computer 14 *THX 1138* 15 *The Chosen One* 16 "Extremis" 17 *To The Devil A Daughter* 18 He's a reptilian alien 19 *A Canticle For Leibowitz* 20 Sto'Vo'Kor

How did you do?

The ecclesiastical hierarchy

0-5 Laity

6-10 Deacon

11-15 Priest

16-19 Archbishop

20 Pope

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

SFX 375
ON SALE 24 JANUARY

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AMC, ALAMY

All contents are subject to change, like a film becoming a miniseries

Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

David Hutchinson

Ed Ricketts, Production Editor

When I was about 13 – sometime in the mid-18th century, it feels like – we'd have "library lessons" as part of English at school. This meant 40 minutes in, er, the library, when we were all supposed to choose a book and just read it.

Most kids read computer magazines like *Crash*, but I was quite happy to browse the shelves, and it was there that I came across an author called David Hutchinson. He had three collections of short stories in our library, called *Thumbprints*, *Fools' Gold* and *Torn Air*, published from 1979 to 1980.

All three comprise a mixture of tales with a largely sci-fi bent, although there are excursions into darker territory with supernatural themes – and even some whimsy. Most notable are a series of loosely connected stories which detail the development of instantaneous travel via " transplacement gates": teleportation, basically.

We gradually realise that these gates become Mankind's downfall. Entire industries, such as transport, fuel and oil, are wiped out almost overnight. Roads are abandoned to the earth. Disease is rife because quarantine is non-existent. People suffer mysterious "tranplacement shock", their minds unable to process instant travel. In short, everything goes to shit.

Cleverly, this narrative is not presented in chronological order throughout the books. Instead we zip back and forth through the timeline, leaving us to piece together events.

But what really blew my tiny teenage mind was the author blurb on the book jackets, which revealed that David was all of 19 years old. Nineteen! A mere six years older than me and he'd already had three books published. In my head it was inconceivable that someone could write so convincingly at that age.

David (or Dave, as he prefers to be known now) is still active; his latest book *Sanctuary* was published in November. I recently found he'd written a fourth story collection, *The Paradise Equation* (1981) – and while I'm tempted to check out his later work, I'm also reluctant. Part of me wants to keep that memory of an inspiring writer wholly intact.

Ed's English teacher Mr Morris was the nicest man alive.

Fact Attack!

- Hutchinson says that his writing career really began at the age of 16, when his mother bought him a typewriter for his birthday.
- There were roughly 20 years between *The Paradise Equation* and 2001's *The Villages*, while he was working as a journalist.
- All four of the original books are still available to buy secondhand – though prices vary from £4 to £95 depending on the source.
- Hutchinson's recent Fractured Europe trilogy is a sci-fi take on the consequences of Brexit, especially for the UK.
- About certain sci-fi fans, he wrote: "I hate the angry and the shouty; I used to think we were better than that, but as usual I was wrong."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY OLLY CURTIS

BBC

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